

# 9 Anti-racist social work

## A black perspective

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It is a fact that racism operates at an ideological, structural, systemic and interpersonal level within contemporary British society. After the rebellions and uprisings of 1981 it became increasingly fashionable in some local government and social work circles to talk about the development of anti-racist policies and practices. But historically for black people (people of African, Caribbean and Asian origins) the struggles against racism in society and in social work did not commence at this juncture. Nor was anti-racist social work born in the closing years of the 1980s with the publication of books and articles bearing that label. The anti-racist struggles and campaigns of the 1960s in the factories and in the streets were authentic struggles of the black working class in Britain. During the 1970s and 1980s small numbers of black people began to occupy spaces not only in the factories but also in the town halls and professional bureaucracies. Black social workers realized how social inequalities are reproduced by welfare institutions.

Disproportionate numbers of black children are now in care, with less chance than white children of reunion with their parents (House of Commons Social Services Committee 1984; HMSO 1991). Welfare services for young offenders operate so inadequately that disproportionate numbers of black adolescents are in custodial establishments (Pitts *et al.* 1986; NACRO 1986 and 1988). Compulsory detention procedures for psychiatric treatment, especially involving use of police powers, are more common for the black community while voluntary admission procedures play a greater part for the white majority (Fernando 1988). Black elders rarely benefit from home help, meals on wheels, holidays and other support services designed for older people (Norman 1985; Patel 1990).

To understand how oppositional social work and forms of dissidence have developed it is important to sketch briefly the background and context within which social work with black communities initially emerged.

Questions of ethnic diversity surfaced quickly and sharply as social services workers in large conurbations began to face linguistic barriers, novel problems

and new dilemmas. The ad hoc response of the local state was to employ one or two black workers. Although social services departments were slower than education departments to make use of section 11 of the 1966 Local Government Act, they began to rely on it. (Under this section central government funding is available for local authorities in order to meet the special needs of immigrants from the Commonwealth whose language and customs differ from the rest of the community.) The appointment of a few black workers was often the social services' only response and gesture towards a growing multiracial community. The use and misuse of this source of central government funding led to scandals and controversy. The full story of section 11 is beyond the scope of this chapter, but the underlying assumption of this approach is important to identify as it emphasized that problems facing black people were caused by the differentness of immigrants. Such an exclusive emphasis on cultural and linguistic differences tended to obscure the material condition of black people and their structural location in this society.

By the mid 1970s the general picture was one of limited or non-existent response by most local authorities to the question of racial inequality. In 1976 the Race Relations Act was passed. Whatever the limitations of the Act, it placed upon local authorities the duty to eliminate unlawful racial discrimination and promote equality of opportunity. The provision of social services to black communities was taken up at a national level by the Commission for Racial Equality which campaigned under the direction of its black social services officer for the development of a more relevant delivery of service for black children and families in the community.

Although social services paid little attention to the implications of the Race Relations Act for their various functions, black practitioners in the voluntary and statutory sector frequently spoke with a different voice, took risks and struggled against racism in their work. Resistance to racism in work with black children and black women are just two examples of their early efforts.

Black children began to enter local authority care in the 1960s. Work with them was dominated by the assimilationist ideology, which concentrated on transmitting a white identity to black children in care as superior and more desirable, an identity which was based on denial of their colour and race, and on self-hatred. Throughout the 1970s black practitioners, although few in number, challenged prevailing orthodoxies and racist institutional practices (Ahmed 1977a, 1978; Coombe 1975). It was not uncommon for black workers to be abused and labelled racists for challenging white mainstream practices.

Similarly, black women have been active since the 1970s in setting up autonomous refuges and safe places. For example, when Asian women facing male violence and mental distress went to white-run refuges they felt isolated and continued to be in psychological crisis. At the most stressful and critical

time of their lives women found themselves in a completely alien environment and unable to benefit from affection and mutual support (Ahmed 1977b; Guru 1986; Wilson 1978). The activities of the Asian Women's Movement and the organisation of Women of Asian and African Descent bear witness to the battles black women were waging during the late 1970s (Bourne 1983; Bryan *et al.* 1985).

By the early 1980s racial politics were changing. Whatever the impact of the black rebellions of 1981 and 1983 in other fields, they seem to have acted as a mechanism for some local authorities to respond to the demands of their local black communities. There was promise of action to tackle racial discrimination in employment and service delivery, perhaps as a way of achieving some social peace. The black rebellions helped to shift the microscope from its initial focus on black minorities as *the* problem, to focus also on the majority society. White workers in the local state were expected to discover their personal racism and to learn to confront the racism of institutions in which they functioned.

Also in this period, the growth of National Front and racial violence involving large numbers of young white people forced many social workers to consider the implications of working with young Nazis on their case loads, notably in probation, intermediate treatment and residential settings. In 1981, following the murder of an Asian doctor by white youths, some of whom were in care, a social worker in a Midlands social services department wrote:

There was not a day without some example of racist abuse. The residents had alternative words to the Specials' hit record *Ghost Town*, which began 'Do you remember the good old days before the wogs came?', followed by lines lampooning Caribbean and Asian physical characteristics, which contained vituperative obscenities. The chant 'Paki, Paki, Paki—out, out, out' was also very popular, as were racist jokes. Two children seriously believed Hitler was on the right lines and were anti-semitic as well as anti-black. This sort of behaviour is either ignored, or when staff do intervene they are dismissed as communists by the residents.

(personal communication)

Another difference that the black unrest of 1981 made was the acceptance of racism by sections of the white left and the adoption of anti-racism as part of an agenda for municipal socialism. Until then many sections of the left had ignored racism and this neglect was reproduced in social work.

Even the (so-called) radical social work theorists seemed incapable of addressing themselves to race, for example *State Social Work and the Working Class* by Chris Jones (1983) and the influential collection of articles on radical social work edited by Roy Bailey and Mike Brake (1975, 1980) as well as the works of Paul Corrigan and Peter Leonard on

Marxist social work (1978). In the main these theorists had a Eurocentric economic orientation and looked at class struggle in an orthodox way. They could not see race struggles as class struggles and seemed incapable of giving a real consideration to the structures of racial exploitation and racial oppression. In these ways the struggles of black people were written out of supposedly radical social work texts and so, for a black perspective, these texts were incomplete, orthodox and traditional in their ultimate impact on social work teaching and practice.

The same problems prevailed in white feminist theory and practice. Generalizations were based on the experiences of the dominant group and the terms of debate, direction, and worthwhileness of issues were set by white women. Black feminism and black women's political agendas were conspicuous by their absence. For example, it was not uncommon for work on the family, or male violence, to ignore black women's perspectives. As black feminists pointed out, the state had a different way of looking at black women. The ideology of the sanctity of family life which the state wishes to promote and the feminists want to question does not always apply to black communities. The state wishes to uphold white family life in its traditional form while at the same time undermining black family life (*Feminist Review* 1984).

Compared to progressive social work agencies, social work academics lagged behind in their experience of recognizing, let alone tackling racism. This group of people largely missed out on the anti-racist struggles, developments and gains made at the community and municipal level during the 1980s (Ahmed 1987). It took longer for white socialists and feminists to concede that social policy is both genderized as well as racialized (*Critical Social Policy* 1988).

Anti-racist social work requires a broad knowledge of state racism and an understanding of the plans of the state, including the political economy of racism. Practitioners need to grasp clearly the political context in which social work is located. They need to know in their minds and feel in their hearts the continuing relationship between underdevelopment for some and overdevelopment for others, colonization and the international movement of labour. Does this mean a constant indulgence in the rhetoric of racism? No, it is a question of awareness, of consciousness. It is above all a question of perspective. If the practitioner has brooded long and hard and seen the relationships between different parts of an unjust social structure and their effects on the individual, the perspective will come, and it will matter little whether the work is with small white children in a multiracial society or with black elders who are dying and bereaved. Anti-racist social work is informed by such a structural perspective and requires competence in countering cultural and institutional racism in

assessment and intervention strategies. It also calls for a will to undertake non-institutional work and make connections with the wider anti-racist struggles in the community.

## **CULTURAL RACISM**

Policy and action come out of the way we conceptualize things; concepts arise out of the material, historical and cultural matrix of society. In British society there is a hierarchy of cultures and those of racial minority groups are ranked very low indeed. If white British practitioners have had no help or preparation in raising their awareness of racism then there are bound to be problems with cultural explanations. It is not surprising, therefore, that references to black clients' cultures frequently reflect negative valuations rather than sensitivity. Even 'radical' practitioners who would not dream of pathologizing the culture of their poor white clients can fall into the racist trap of blaming minority group cultures. It is as though the black person spontaneously, by the very act of appearing on the scene, enters into a pre-existing framework of black cultures.

The abuses of cultural dimension in social work assessment and intervention are more fully discussed elsewhere (Ahmed 1986a). Perhaps to practitioners struggling to introduce into the work of their agencies a greater understanding of the culture of the service users, this coolness towards the cultural dimension may come as something of a surprise. However, the argument is not against better cultural understanding but against an over-reliance on cultural explanations which distract attention from significant emotional factors, as well as from structural factors such as gender, class and race. It is crucial to grasp the contradictions and tensions in culturally relevant work. Practitioners must recognize that social policy is always shot through with contradictory elements, as is the case with the Children Act 1989, and these have to be guarded against.

The Children Act 1989 is a significant political shift in social policy (Ahmed 1991a). For the first time in child care legislation, the local authorities will be under a duty to give due consideration, not only to religion, which has been part of child care law for many years, but also to three other important factors—a child's racial, ethnic and linguistic background (section 22[5]). Seemingly, this will have major implications for social workers as it will be unlawful to ignore the race, culture, language and religion of children who are looked after by the statutory and voluntary institutions. However, multi-culturalism poses a number of theoretical and practice challenges which will have to be confronted.

First, multi-culturalism lacks a power analysis. It sees other cultures as valuable and interesting but the central reality of racism is either ignored, or

racism is ascribed to the personal prejudices of a small number of ignorant, misguided or intolerant people. Most disconcertingly, it usually reflects a white view of black cultures as traditional, homogeneous, static and exotic. Culture is not seen as a continually changing process but as a relatively permanent characteristic of groups.

Second, multi-culturalism has been perverted by the arguments of the new right into a new form of racism, by converting cultural diversity into a deterministic theory of race. It has asserted the exclusivity of white Britishness and black people are not seen as part of the British nation. In the words of a National Front song, 'there ain't no black in the Union Jack'. Anyone not white is not British. They are the alien wedge and the enemy within. The intellectual organs of the new right such as the *Salisbury Review* have in the past decade of Thatcherism promoted a vulgar jingoistic nationalism in which the cultures, religions and lifestyles of Asian and African Caribbean people have been systematically disparaged and promoted as *so different* that they can threaten the social order (*Salisbury Review* 1982, 1983).

Third, multi-culturalism has done a disservice to black women's interests. Minority ethnic groups have come to be defined, as stated earlier, as being internally unified homogeneous entities with no class or gender differences or conflicts. For South Asian service users they have often come to be defined by religion only. Women's demands for freedom and equality have been seen in some arenas as clearly outside cultural traditions and therefore not regarded as legitimate. By contrast, the most conservative traditions are considered the most authentic. This is a terrible trap for social workers who will need to develop a more sophisticated understanding of community and culture.

Minority ethnic groups are not internally unified entities without class and gender differences. Black women, in particular, often negotiate between a number of cultures. On the one hand, there can be the culture of the 'traditionalists' within the black communities. On the other hand, there is the culture of resistance to 'traditionalism'. Above all, there is the culture of racism of the dominant society. The culture of racism permeates all spectrums of British society—the right and the left.

## INSTITUTIONAL RACISM

Institutional racism is a limited but useful concept for illustrating how assumptions in the assessment and decision-making process can affect the provision, style and content of services. Key elements in recognizing institutional racism are the policies, practices and procedures and criteria of decision making which disproportionately disadvantage particular racial groups. Institutional racism is perpetuated even when there is a lack of intention

to discriminate. Examples of institutional racism abound in the opportunity structures for training, jobs and access to services. A study of the internal arrangements of the London borough of Lambeth revealed a wide range of discriminatory practices through an analysis of traditional structures and policies. This study of the system shows quite clearly that the so-called 'colour blind' approach is discriminatory in its effects on different racial and cultural groups (Ouseley *et al.* 1983).

When considering access to services, the important point to note is that there can be concern both about *over-representation* as well as *under-representation* of minority ethnic groups in relation to their numbers and circumstances in the community. For instance, it is justifiable to examine whether there is a disproportionate number of black children in care. On the other hand, in many parts of the country Asian and African Caribbean offenders are usually under-represented in community based disposals and disproportionately over-represented in custodial sentences (NACRO 1986, 1988). We must also remember that the activities of social welfare agencies are not only concerned with social control functions but also with the provision of social support. Yet when it comes to social support some communities can suffer from too little intervention. For example there are widespread myths about the capacity of South Asian people and Chinese people to look after their own. Such ideas among care workers may underestimate the needs of people for services.

Assessment of need and provision of services assumes a new importance under the Community Care and NHS act of 1990 (Dutt 1990; Johnson 1990). It took many years of agitation, struggles and pain to place race equality strategies on the agenda of local authorities, only to find that the system of local government as welfare state is being dismantled. In addition, mechanisms such as contracting out largely favour the old established white voluntary sector which has either simply ignored, or significantly lagged behind in anti-racist work (Henry 1990).

Anti-racist social work expects answers to the following type of questions:

- Is the number of black children coming into care increasing? Why are they coming into care and are the reasons changing?
- Are the rates of registration of black people with physical disabilities the same as for the white population?
- Are aids and adaptations being given to black people at similar rates as white people and are they receiving community care services at the same level?
- What is the incidence of compulsory admissions under the Mental Health Act? Is it similar between all communities, black and white? What are the implications of high or low compulsory admission rates?

- Are black organizations receiving contracts for care? Are black carers receiving support?

It certainly cannot be assumed that just because an organization states its intention to offer equal opportunities to all, that will invariably be translated into practice. A system needs to be devised which can measure whether equal opportunities are, in fact, being offered. Yet record keeping and monitoring the delivery of social services to minority ethnic groups has been consistently resisted (Ahmed 1986b; Butt *et al.* 1991; Connelly 1985). This applies to traditional as well as to so-called progressive organizations such as feminist projects, and new services for people living with HIV and AIDS.

Of course, services are being ravaged and are in short supply and in the near future additional resources are likely to be limited. None the less, there is still a need to establish whether minority group members in social need stand an equal chance of receiving support. This raises issues of access to services as well as the style and content of services for those in the community who are at the bottom and have the least. Therefore, services must be appropriate at the point of delivery.

Anti-racist social work is also underpinned by another vital strand: the turning of cases into causes. Cases are alienated, disconnected and institutional; issues and causes are local, national and anti-institutional. Social workers see the operation of disadvantage and discrimination. They are strategically well placed to use it for the wider community. They must not confuse confidentiality with secrecy. The right of the black community to care for children in need is one example where concerted efforts to work closely with black parents, black councillors and other progressive forces in the community made some impact on provision of services (Ahmed 1980, 1986c; ABSWAP 1983). For far too long black child care issues were seen as professional matters when clearly they were political ones; and eventually agency centred, as well as community centred interventions were needed. Social workers working alone are in danger of repeatedly losing the power battles within their organizations. They need to recognize that working for change cannot be reduced to activity within office walls. They will need to broaden their tactics and link with the wider anti-racist struggles within the black communities.

Anti-racist social work must also recognize the contradictions and deficiencies of social work theories as well as their potential for analysis and action. There is space here only to demonstrate *some* problems with one of these theories—the psychodynamic treatment model—but this does not mean that other traditional social work theories are problem free (Ahmed 1991b). The difficulties are illustrated by the case of John Smith, 13 years old and charged jointly with five other white boys for causing damage to the seats of a school bus. All six youngsters made statements to the police admitting their



guilt. The question to be addressed is: what difference do the class, gender and race of the client make? In so far as social work relies on the psychodynamic 'treatment' model, then to a large extent it tends, in practice, to divorce individuals from their social structural context and to locate problems firmly in the individual or in family pathology.

If John's situation is diagnostically understood on the basis of the psychodynamic treatment model, social workers will plan intervention to modify their client's personality. The worker's major tool in treatment will often be the use of self and the relationship with the client. The social workers will hope that the client's ego controls will be strengthened by building up his self-esteem, expressing love and concern and providing an example of benevolent authority perhaps through a supervision order. Alternatively, John's family group may become the target of intervention and some modifications of interaction patterns and attitudes within the family may become the treatment goal. This belief system can lead to a disproportionate amount of consideration being given to John as an individual and little to the wider social system with which he interacts. It ignores the institutionalized class bias in the processing of young offenders. Implicitly and sometimes explicitly mothers may be blamed. In the case of white mothers the blame is likely to be individualized but black mothers are blamed collectively. Negative images of black family life have crept into social work and social policy analysis. The African Caribbean family is often seen as a tangle of pathology, virtually non-existent as a unit or rapidly falling apart, with mothers being seen as too strong and over-committed to wage earning. On the other hand, the Asian family is seen as problematic because the mother's position is considered weak and unimportant (Scarman Report 1981; Ahmed *et al.* 1986a).

As behaviour in the psychodynamic treatment model is seen as unconsciously motivated, and rule breaking is interpreted as a symptom of underlying emotional needs, particular difficulties in personal relationships and personality problems may well be identified. Eurocentric ideas of 'normality' and 'pathology' are influential. Narrow concepts of good childrearing patterns, bonding processes, and what constitutes rejection and disruption often prevail. Individuals who are raised in extended families in the most formative years of their lives and who may have had many people to relate to can be seen as lacking in capacity for strong relationships. Many of us from the black communities would fail this kind of normality test.

Had the case concerned a white girl (Jane Smith, not John Smith) another kind of normality test might operate whereby sex role expectations may play their part. After all, girls who like to roam the streets freely as boys do, or to climb trees and participate in even mildly 'aggressive' or 'assertive' behaviour are nicknamed tomboys in white British cultures. So a group of white girls who might have ripped the seats of a bus would be seen as very

troublesome indeed. Jane's actions may not only be seen as 'pathological', they may also be compounded with moral overtones. Jane may be seen as 'at risk', 'in moral danger', 'beyond parental control'. These have been grounds for obtaining care orders—a harsher disposal than community-based options.

What if the case had concerned black children? What kinds of disposals could be expected? It is a fact that even the psychodynamically oriented white practitioners have frequently taken flight from working with black clients. They have argued that when supervision orders are recommended they are expected to form a relationship with the client. However, because they often experience communication problems with black defendants they see little point in recommending therapeutic or other community-based disposals. This approach invariably results in harsher outcomes for black offenders (*Pitts et al.* 1986).

The important point is to recognize that social work theory as well as social work action are both genderized as well as racialized. There are problems with anti-racist strategies if they are seen in isolation from other disadvantages and oppressions. It is far too readily assumed that new social movements are essentially progressive. Yet, the politics of anti-racism has shown a limited capacity to tackle the institutionalized sexism of white agencies and the sexism of black cultures. It is apparent that anti-racism itself cannot be a complete philosophy. Anti-racism has to be class conscious. It has to be gender conscious. It should not be detached from the politics of other oppressions such as sexuality and disability. Society is clearly divided not only by race, but also by gender and class, but theorizing about race, gender and class together has not often taken place. The issue for anti-racist social work is to bring it together in both theory and practice.

It will be obvious by now that anti-racist work is rooted in a structural analysis of society and social work. It requires the capacity to work at different levels and requires many different types of skills and abilities. Such an analysis can lead to interventions which can be agency centred (e. g. changing discriminatory policies), or community centred (supporting campaigns for better resources), or individual centred (supporting individuals and working with mental distress and unhappiness). This form of work requires skills and understanding of collaborative as well as conflict methods. Competence in individual work, groupwork and community work as well as organizational change is relevant.

The work of black practitioners with black children and black women referred to in the introductory sections of this chapter are two examples where a combination of methods has been required. Practitioners have needed theories for black clients' emotional well being, as well as skills in individual

and groupwork, for example working with individual children who have spoiled identities, and working in groups with children and adults to discover collectively the roots of oppression. They have also been more than prepared to do political work at a community campaigning level (Ahmed 1980, 1986c; Ahmad 1990; Maxime 1986). This style of work has often bridged traditional polarizations between community work and casework. Those who hanker for a return to social work's conservative roots have missed the meaning of anti-racist social work.

Whatever the method of social work, anti-racist practice is grounded in a social action perspective and should include the following:

**Developing a critical consciousness** is an ability to analyse social work situations in social and political terms, understanding the political connections, local and global relationships and change and development within organizations and communities.

**Accountability** means that the question of power cannot be ducked; anti-racist social workers should always try to shift it downwards towards service users.

**Empowerment** means working out possibilities of change with affected people themselves and facilitating political organization amongst service users.

**Knowing the community**, its strengths and the difficulties it faces; being involved in its struggles.

**Knowing the agency** is to be well informed about how policies are developed and to challenge inequalities. Developing influencing skills and strategies for organizational change.

**Collective working** means promoting and supporting practices which help in building a supportive culture wherever possible. Avoiding adventurism and isolationism; working towards organizational democracy.

**Expert testimony** entails organizing professional comment on specific issues, for example supporting lesbian mothers in custody cases.

This is not an exhaustive list, but some critical triggers for what is often required.

Anti-racist work has been attacked not only by the right, who are implacably opposed to any form of affirmative action at collective, or national and local

state level, but its validity has also been questioned by black academics, who have sometimes presented it as simply the bureaucratization of oppression (Gilroy 1987a and b). More fundamentally, there are those who would challenge the whole notion of race equality strategies within a highly class-stratified society (Sivanandan 1985, 1991).

The relationship between class and race is not a new debate, it has raged at least since the beginning of this century (Robinson 1983). Many black radicals saw racial divisions as the most important cleavage in metropolitan societies. They were not always prepared to subsume race under class. The key points in their analysis were that there is a racial division of labour even when black people are employed. The working class in white metropolitan societies is racially segmented and there is an aristocracy of labour. There are classes within classes and black people are overwhelmingly in the lowest reaches of the economy. In post-imperial Britain most profit has been extracted from black workers, especially black women (Bryan *et al.* 1985). Black workers are exploited by the bosses and oppressed by fellow workers. To summarize in Toney Ottey's phrase, 'It may be that blacks are in the same boat as poor whites; but we are on different decks' (Ottey 1978).

The conceptions 'equality of opportunity', 'racial equality', 'anti-racism' and 'black perspectives', and the strategies which are proposed, must indeed be subjected to critical evaluation. They are not self-sufficient positions. All these notions are fundamentally limited in their impact. They are a coat of paint. They do not have the power to transform society. Anti-racist social work does not embody an epic version of change. But it cannot wait for the complete dismantling of Britain's stratified and unjust society. The point is that social work needs to understand that some people are exploited and oppressed because of their class position, some are exploited and oppressed because of class and gender, and some are exploited and oppressed because of class, race *and* gender. To this can be added further oppression and discrimination which is based on disability, ageism, sexuality and so on. Hence the notion of multiple oppressions must be taken seriously in social work (Baxter *et al.* 1990; Begum 1992).

Anti-racist social workers understand only too well that legal action, new laws and better cultural understanding will not eradicate racism, sexism, disablism or poverty. There is no cause for complacency. Racism keeps changing forms and requires new combative strategies. The adoption of anti-racist policy itself can also be a way of managing and neutralizing black resistance at local and national levels. Therefore, anti-racist practice should be critical practice.

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