

Talking about racism

At last there is a real understanding of race, and the ancient and disreputable idea that the peoples of the world are divided into biologically distinct units has gone forever.

Many white people find it difficult to find the words for discussing racial issues. Sometimes they are afraid of using particular words for fear of offending someone and saying something that is apparently, but not intentionally, rude. Faced with the issue of a person's racial group or ethnicity, some white people may deal with it by trying to avoid using any specific words at all. This may be because they do not know many black people personally or do not feel comfortable enough to discuss such things with them.

Different people, whether black or white, make a variety of choices as to which terms they like to use to describe themselves and others. Clearly some are unacceptable and are largely recognised as such. Others are the topic of differing opinions and, because of this, such differences cannot easily be resolved. It is important to understand that the use of any racial term involves strongly held beliefs and feelings. There is consequently a need to be sensitive and adaptable.

It is easier to raise issues and ask questions if an atmosphere of trust and respect between people has been built up. In this situation it becomes more comfortable to 'correct' or discuss particular terminology without giving offence or being offended. Constant, open discussion generally makes it easier to ask people what they prefer to use when talking about 'race'.

Meanings can change

Terminology changes with time. What might be acceptable to some people one day may, in a very short time, be less acceptable or unacceptable. For example, the term 'coloured' has been used by white (and sometimes black) people in the past to describe others and themselves. It is still used by some older people now, often because they feel it is rude to describe someone as 'black'. The fact that the word 'coloured' is considered more 'polite' by many of the people who use it shows that it was not always seen as a negative term by everyone. However, it has a significant association with colonialism, slavery and apartheid that has made it come to be

seen as a negative term, and it is not used so frequently now.

Other terms are racially offensive at all times and have always been such by the recipient. Terms such as 'Nigger', 'Wop', 'Coon', 'Gyppo', 'Wog', 'Yid', 'Dago', 'Paki', 'Kike' and 'Paddy' were and are racist in intent and hurtful to the recipient. They are unacceptable.

The terms 'Caucasian', 'Negroid' and 'Mongoloid' derive from attempts to categorise people according to their skin colour and physical characteristics. There is no scientific basis for these divisions and they have no place in Britain today.

Words used for talking about racism

The terminology used in this book applies to Britain. It may or may not be applicable elsewhere. Care should always be taken when using terminology in non-British contexts. Terms that are obvious to us may have a completely different meaning for people in other communities.

Describing people

Words are constantly changing in their use and acceptability. Here are some words and how they are commonly used:

- **African-Caribbean:** People whose origins are from Africa and/or the Caribbean.
- **Asian and South Asian:** People from, or originating from, India, Bangladesh, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.
- **Black:** People who are discriminated against because of their skin colour. These words are usually used as 'political' terms, to unite the people who are discriminated against. Some people use the term 'Black' to refer specifically to people of African-Caribbean origin.
- **Ethnic minority, ethnic majority:** People whose ethnic group is in a minority or majority in a country. It includes people of all skin colours.
- **Minority ethnic, majority ethnic:** These terms are often preferred to the two above as they recognise that everyone has an ethnicity, whether it is in the majority or the minority.

- **Mixed parentage, mixed 'race', mixed heritage:** People whose parents are from different ethnic or racial groups. Sometimes there is a conflict between what people feel themselves to be and how others may perceive them, which may lead to particularly strong views about terminology. It is important to listen to and respect what is being said and felt. (The term 'half-caste' has fallen out of use in much the same way as the term 'coloured', but for different reasons. It is a negative term suggesting that a person doesn't really fit in anywhere.)
- **Travellers:** People who are traditionally nomadic, whether they are still so or not. If they are nomadic they move around, but the majority now live in houses or on permanent sites, while still being Travellers. Even when Travellers live in houses, they may travel in the summer. They still experience racism.

Nomadic Travellers travel from place to place seeking work but, because most of their original work is no longer in demand, they have adapted to other trades. They include English and Welsh Gypsies (some of whom may be Romany Gypsies), fairground and circus people, Irish and Scottish Travellers (who sometimes call themselves Gypsies), Bargees and New Travellers (who are generally seeking an alternative way of life) and, more recently, European Roma who have obtained refugee or immigrant status.

The term 'Traveller' has a capital 'T' ('travellers' would include tourists and commercial travellers). The term 'Gypsy' has a capital 'G'.

- **White:** This is again a political term. It refers to people who are not 'black' and who are usually of European origin, whose skin colour or tone is pale.
- People from countries such as China, Vietnam, Nagaland, Italy, Cyprus, Egypt and those in eastern Europe do not fit into any of the above categories. They may simply be described as coming from that country. Note that countries such as South Africa, Ghana and Egypt all belong to the continent Africa.

Everyone can make mistakes. What is needed is the confidence to become familiar with these words and to use them as part of a commitment to remove racism, by talking about them in an atmosphere of trust and by not being afraid to make a mistake and learn from it.

Other terms

As with the previous group of words, some of the following may change their interpretations over time.

- **Anti-racist, anti-racism** refers to resources, policies, practices and procedures that recognise the existence of racism in its many forms and take appropriate action to remove it. Anti-racism recognises racism as being the major obstacle to racial equality.
- **Anti-Semitism** is racism against Jewish people.
- **Culture** Everyone has a 'culture' as a result of their lives and experiences. It includes all those factors that have contributed to these experiences. It is not just the 'high days' and festivals but also the minutiae of everyday life. Elements of culture may include factors such as language, social class, religious beliefs and practices, 'traditions', dress and food. No culture is superior or inferior to another.
- **Ethnic data** (for example, information about the ethnic composition of the local community) is collected in various ways, according to the reason for collecting it. There should always be a clear reason for collecting ethnic data, including an explanation for why it is needed and what will be done with it, plus a clear statement of confidentiality (that the identity of individuals surveyed will not be available).
- **Ethnicity** refers to an individual's identification with a group sharing some or all of the same culture, lifestyle, language, religion, nationality, geographical region and history. Every person has an ethnicity. Concepts of 'ethnic food', ethnic dress' and 'ethnic books' are therefore nonsense.
- **Ethnocentrism** is the process of viewing or interpreting the world from the perspective of a particular ethnic group. 'Eurocentrism' is, for example, viewing the non-European world from a European perspective.
- **Multiculturalism** is an acceptance and positive attitude towards the cultural variety in society. However, multiculturalism may simply provide ammunition to reinforce racism unless there is recognition of the way that different cultures are ranked in a racial hierarchy.

- **Non-racist** refers to resources, policies, practices and procedures that take a neutral approach to racism, neither acknowledging it, denying it nor opposing it.
- **'Race'** is in everyday use, but the word 'race' is in quotation marks here because it is a controversial term. The word comes from historical attempts to categorise people according to their skin colour and physical characteristics. There is no scientific basis for divisions into biologically determined groups. Individuals, not nations or 'races', are the main sources of human variation.
- **Racial discrimination** is the treatment of people of some 'races' less favourably than others would be treated in the same circumstances. Under the 1976 Race Relations Act racial discrimination is defined specifically, in several ways, to cover particular situations and circumstances.
- **Racial group** refers to those who are of, or belong to, the same 'race'. They have the same racial origins.
- **Racial harassment** refers to verbal, non-verbal or physical aggression towards people of various 'races'. If the 'victim' believes that it was because they belong to a particular racial group then, unless proved otherwise, it is usually defined as 'racial' harassment, whatever other people may say. In some situations children may not realise they are being racially harassed or abused, but adults who witness the incident will be able to identify it.
- **Racial prejudice** is the term for opinion or attitude about people of various 'races', based on false or inadequate evidence. It is a tendency to judge people in a particular way and is often self-perpetuating because the (usually negative) judgement of people from different 'races' prevents any interaction with them. Surveys in Britain show that white people are more likely to be racially prejudiced than others. However, racial prejudice may exist (and sometimes does) between any racial groups. Racial prejudice, where some groups are marked out as 'different', is found in most parts of the world.
- **Racial stereotyping** is categorisation (usually negative) of a whole racial group of people because of the actions or behaviour of one person, or a few people, or as the result of racial prejudice. It is also when a general stereotype is

transferred to a particular person. It often becomes part of the cultural legacy. It is still stereotyping even if the stereotype is positive – for example, being 'good at sport', 'having a sense of rhythm' or 'having the gift of the gab' are all racial stereotypes when applied to groups of people.

- **Racism** is all practices and procedures that discriminate against people because of their colour, culture and/or 'race' or ethnicity. It includes the whole package of racial prejudice, discrimination, stereotyping, making racist assumptions, harassment, institutional and structural racism and ethnocentrism. In Britain there is racism against Jewish people, Asian people, Chinese people, Irish people, Travellers, black people, Gypsies, people from many other ethnic groups, people from particular nationalities and often refugees and asylum seekers. So many social, economic and political decisions are in the hands of white people and have been so historically, that white people rarely suffer from institutional and structural forms of racial discrimination in Britain.
 - *Institutional racism* is racism that is not usually a result of an individual action, and works in precisely the same way as institutional discrimination to discriminate against people specifically because of their 'race'. Such practices and procedures are often long established, but have failed to take account of the reality of multiracial Britain. This is similar to 'indirect racial discrimination', as defined under the 1976 Race Relations Act.
 - *Structural racism* is racism that is not a result of individual action or of an institutional nature, where the existing structures of the society discriminates against particular racial groups.

What these terms really mean

The terms given are definitions and may have different meanings or be used differently when applied to real life.

No terms are agreed by everyone. The contradictions and conflicts that the use of many terms arouse in people must be acknowledged, even if they are not all understood. Very few terms are set in stone, fixed in meaning for ever. The continual changes in word meanings and interpretations,

and the need to explore the issues around words, reflect the fact that the debate about 'race' and culture is ongoing. It will always be so.

Black, black

The word 'black' is often misused. It was first used in Britain in the 1960s, when people of many different ethnic origins, but with a skin colour that was not 'white', wanted a term to describe themselves in order that they could present a more united front against the racism they all experienced. 'Black' seemed the most acceptable word and it is a political term.

In the past, the word 'black' was often used negatively and offensively. In the United States during the 1960s, there was a huge campaign to reclaim the word positively and particularly to stress the idea that 'Black is beautiful'. Most white people at that time saw black people as inevitably ugly (this was tied to white people's own perceptions of superiority), so it was a vitally important campaign to make people rethink their ideas and accept that 'beauty is in the eye of the beholder' and not the sole right of white people. The concept of what is beautiful is learned, so it can be unlearned.

Everyone needs to be aware of the large number of negative ways that the word 'black' can be used and the number of positive ways that white is used. For example, 'pure white gloves', 'dirty black hands' and 'black mark'. For a child to have his hands described as 'dirty black' may reinforce black as being a dirty colour by definition. It is, therefore, likely to be hurtful. It also reinforces, in the ears of white children, the negative association of black and dirty – as if they go together.

However, a lot of nonsense has been written and said about using the word 'black'. In the 1980s, sections of the media and others cooked up stories about various anti-racist organisations and local authorities, allegedly saying that they had banned terms like 'black coffee' or 'black bin liner' because they would be offensive to black people. These stories were without foundation and were used to ridicule the organisations, making them appear to be extreme forms of thought police.

There are many words and phrases such as 'blackboard', 'white snow' and 'black bin liner' that are accurate descriptions and which make no value judgements, either positive or negative. It is absolutely appropriate for these

things to be defined in this way. A sensitivity and a sense of reality are needed here.

Culture

The word 'culture' is often used only to describe the culture of people who are not white.

When white English people are asked to describe their culture, they usually find it difficult and may end up talking about top hats, roast beef, rolled umbrellas, Beefeaters and Morris dancing. They then realise that these things are not typical of the majority of English people. Similarly, most French people's culture does not include carrying strings of onions and not all Mexicans wear sombreros.

Cultural stereotyping is not only ridiculous; it is dangerous, because it makes assumptions that do not reflect reality. Everyone has a culture, or cultures, but it seems that only *some* people are required to define what their culture means for them. Most white English people just take whatever is their culture for granted and find it difficult to define in precise terms, whereas other whiter British people – the Welsh, Scottish, Irish and Cornish – can clearly talk about their own distinctive cultures. Usually, only people who migrate to Britain are 'required' to describe their cultures so that they can be analysed, evaluated and accepted – or not. It is as if white (English) culture is hardly a culture at all, it is simply taken as the norm by which every other culture is judged.

Ethnicity

There are links between culture and ethnicity, but ethnicity is more specific in its geographical origin. For example, people born in Delhi in India have a Delhi (Indian) ethnic origin, wherever they move to. The same person's culture might change over time, particularly after emigration. Aspects of the culture may change but the ethnicity remains the same.

Minority ethnic or ethnic minority people are frequently and incorrectly called 'ethnics'. In Britain they usually have brown or black skin colours and the words often take on the same meaning (i.e. ethnic minority *equals* ethnic *equals* brown or black). Used in this way, the term 'ethnic minority' becomes a descriptive term rather than a term describing a proportion of people.

Talking the same language

It takes a long time before specific meanings for terms are understood by everyone and used equally by them. Difficulties involved in coming to common understanding are revealed when people from different countries with different histories and understandings of the world try to work together using a common language. For example, a recent European seminar looking at racism in childcare and education was held in England. Early on, one of the participants said she was unable to continue working in a racist hotel (the venue for the seminar). She showed the others a sign in the foyer saying 'Only residents may use the lounge'. She had understood 'resident' to mean 'citizen'.

Another misunderstanding is where words are translated literally. For example, at an international conference for childminders the term 'black childminder' was initially used interchangeably with 'illegal' or 'unofficial' childminder, as in black market.

The English language is forever changing. The important point when using and discussing words for talking about 'race' is to be continually receptive and sensitive to the words that other people use and their reactions to yours.