Racialism in Society

L D Howe
AEA Technology plc*, Culham Science Centre, Abingdon
Oxon, OX14 3ED, UK

February 1999

Executive Summary

The question of racialism, often referred to as racism, within the police force is a subject which has become the focus of attention in recent months. This follows the widespread interest generated by the Stephen Lawrence case and other high profile cases which have been reported over the past few years. Senior police officers have stated that they consider that racism exists, or is even endemic, in several police forces. The term 'institutional racism' has come to be used by some senior officers. Without a true understanding of the nature of the problem and its root causes, it is unlikely that any moves to eradicate racism would achieve a significant, lasting, successful resolution of the problem. There are two key questions which must be addressed before the problem can be tackled effectively:

- What is racism and how does it relate to other forms of discrimination?
- How can an established culture be changed to eradicate discrimination?

The principal conclusions of this paper are that:

- Racial discrimination results from the division of society into groups;
- The assignation of individuals to groups leads to false assumptions about them;
- Methods which do not deal with the grouping problem are unsound;
- In order to change attitudes it is necessary to change the culture;
- The culture must be open and blame free to encourage honest assessment;
- Implementation must be planned to a realistic time scale;
- Failures and setbacks must be expected and planned for.

Contents

1 Introduction

The question of racialism, often referred to as racism, is a subject that has increasingly become the focus of attention in recent times. Within the UK, widespread interest has been generated by the Stephen Lawrence case and other high profile cases reported over the past few years. Senior police officers have stated that they consider that racism exists, or is even endemic, in several police forces. There have been repeated exhortations from the media to 'stamp out' racism within the police force. The term 'institutional racism' has come to be used to refer to discrimination in many institutions. Some have undertaken to come to terms with the problem. The usual vehicle cited for dealing with the problem is to recruit members of ethnic minorities or use "positive" discrimination. However, without a true understanding of the nature of the problem and its root causes, it is unlikely that any such moves would achieve a significant, lasting, successful resolution of the problem. There are two key questions that must be addressed before the problem can be tackled effectively:

- What is racism and how does it relate to other forms of discrimination?
- How can an established culture be changed to eradicate discrimination?

The first of these is crucial to the understanding of the problem. If this is not tackled realistically, any attempt to change attitudes and actions will fail to deal with the root causes of the problem. The second is essential to the solution. Once a sufficient level of understanding has been reached, a satisfactory outcome can be achieved only if measures are introduced to facilitate a genuine culture change. Many businesses have introduced culture change, apparently successfully, only for the old culture to resurface after a period of one or two years. Therefore a true culture change needs to be nurtured in order to win over the hearts and minds of all within any institution wishing to tackle the problem seriously.

2 The Nature of Racism

Racism is a form of group discrimination. Like all forms of discrimination, it has two broad forms, overt racism and latent racism. Unfortunately, with racism, the overt form can be more extreme than most other types of discrimination, leading to baiting and the deliberate seeking of targets. It is interesting to note that such behaviour is often observed between rival factions where race is not an issue, such as occurred in the Mafia struggles in Chicago or currently occurs between sectarian factions in Northern Ireland. A more extreme form of this, with racial overtones, exists in the republics of the former Yugoslavia.

2.1 A divided view of the World

Racism like all forms of discrimination, divides the world into two factions, 'us' and 'them'. Typical terms for 'them' are 'black', West Indian', 'Indian', 'white', 'foreign', 'Jew', 'Arab', 'British', 'one of them', etc., together with many, much more inflammatory names. These terms all involve racial intolerance and are aimed at different groups of humanity. The words themselves are often innocuous, but the inference behind them is usually malicious. The one thing they all have in common is that they stress the difference between 'us' and 'them'. In that respect, they parallel other terms expressing such differences, such as 'fat', 'short', 'woman', 'scouse', 'old', 'gay', etc. It should be noted that such discriminations do not divide the world into a multitude of groups. Even when a person identifies several groups as different, the intention (albeit, usually unacknowledged) is to simply identify the various symptoms of 'differentness'.

In its overt form, racism is a pronunciation of firmly believed values: because 'they' are different, inferior, less worthy, malicious, or pose a threat to society. In its latent form, it comes to the surface when the perpetrator is offended or feels threatened. It should be noted, however, that like any other form of discrimination, to succeed, it depends on an observable difference between the subject and the object of the discrimination, be it a visual, audible or other difference. Take the case of two people of different race who look to be of the same race, dress in a manner acceptable to each other and who speak a form of language which is familiar to both. Neither person is likely to be the target for discriminatory behaviour by the other, unless that person deliberately sets out to emphasise the difference. An obvious exception to this is when regimes of persecution exist, where the subject intentionally takes action to discover any hidden differences. Such regimes can be national, but also can exist as 'institutions' within society.

2.2 The cause of group discrimination

It may be argued that the cause of discrimination is fear: for example, fear of the unknown, of losing face, of being eclipsed or of a reduced standard of living. We have already seen that fear can play a part in releasing latent discrimination. However, the cause of group discrimination is almost certainly even more basic than fear. It is simply the division of the world into them and us. Having identified a group that is different, it is a small step to believe that the group in question, as a whole, poses a threat, that they are responsible for the ills of the world. This gives rise to the belief that 'they' will take our jobs, are stupid, are inferior, etc. Such differences and beliefs can be identified in many areas, even between scientists and engineers, for example, although to a significantly less extent. However, the degree of belief is largely immaterial to the cause. Given the right circumstances, even mildly held beliefs can be escalated to levels of severe discrimination. There are examples from around the world where people have lived together within a society for centuries, despite their differences. Mild discrimination existed all this time, but when the differences were exploited, dreadful consequences ensued. It is not suggested that scientists and engineers are about to resort to physical violence, but the point at issue is that the degree of belief is only a symptom of the current status of the perceived difference.

Reference has already been made to institutions within society. One of the concerns expressed by some senior police officers is that 'institutional racism' exists within their forces. The term 'institution' has several definitions, but here it is used to describe an organisation or body of people with a distinct identity. In this respect, the police force (*i.e.* the collective of all individual forces) can be regarded as an institution. The existence of an institution has several advantages. It often leads to a sense of pride in the institution, can enhance morale and gives a feeling of *ésprit de corps*. However, the benefits or otherwise of an institution depend critically on the organisational culture. When the culture is open, outgoing and receptive to change and new ideas, the benefits are likely to be significant. When the culture is traditional and inward looking, there could be significant dis-benefits, particularly with regard to discrimination. This arises because the existence of an institution gives rise to a "them and us" situation. Provided the culture accepts outsiders as equals, or even as offering examples to be emulated, the differences are minimised. But if the institution perceives the outsiders as in some way unequal, then institutional discrimination can be the result.

2.3 An extra dimension for law enforcement

There is an especial danger with regard to law enforcement. Those who consider themselves to be law abiding, see a need to maintain standards and facilitate the justice system. It is easy for them to consider lawbreakers as being on a level below them. In many cases this will be a latent form of discrimination. This may lead to a jaundiced view of some sections of society. It is not unusual for disadvantaged members of society to be more prone to law breaking than those who are not significantly disadvantaged. It is also the case that in general, minorities, particularly those who have recently (on a scale of a few decades) arrived in a geographic location, are significantly disadvantaged. This is, at least in part, because such members of society are identified as 'them' by a large element of society in general. Thus, the confinement to a disadvantaged group by society is compounded with the likelihood that at least some members of society might associate them with law breaking. This gives an extra dimension to the difficulties of dealing with discrimination.

The question now arises as to whether this extra dimension increases the complexity of the response or is simply an extra stimulus for spreading discrimination. The preceding discourse on organisational culture suggests that if the culture is right, the problem can be dealt with adequately. Therefore, it is here proposed that the extra dimension is merely an instrument of propagation and can be taken into account when seeking to remedy the situation. What it may imply is that any action to eradicate racism with regard to law enforcement could require particular attention to detail to ensure that the special dimension is neutralised.

2.4 Why group discrimination exists

Group discrimination exists because of the categorising of society into them and us. In order to divide society into such categories, it is necessary to see people as part of a group with common characteristics. This may be race, colour, nationality, age, sex, etc. The important thing is that by so classifying individuals, they lose their individual characteristics. We de-humanise them, reducing them to what we see as the lowest common denominator. It is very easy to classify someone as being the 'same' as another person because some of their actions coincide with those of one we met previously. What we do in this situation is to take two subsets of behaviour that coincide and assume that the whole behaviour pattern of both individuals is identical. Thus, when we consider an individual as a member of a group, we take a subset of information about that individual, be it colour, race, etc. and extrapolate the whole of their behaviour to be the same as that which we have assumed for the group. Unfortunately, the behaviour that we ascribe to the group may be ill informed, even as a generalisation. The result is that we then discriminate by assuming certain, untrue, characteristics are associated with the individual. If those characteristics assume the ideas of lack of intelligence or inferiority this can lead to overt discrimination including baiting, insults and making fun of the targets. Although the causes of discrimination are very complex, it can be seen that the fundamental basis for group discrimination, such as racial discrimination, is the assignment of individuals to groups. Without such a designation, it could not exist. Other forms of individual discrimination are, of course, still possible and require a more complex approach to be taken, which is beyond the scope of this paper.

3 The Eradication of Racism

It is clear from the foregoing discussion that in order to remove racism it is necessary to remove its root causes. This means that group discrimination generally needs to be addressed. Because the fundamental basis of group discrimination is the classification of individuals into groups, the cessation of such classification is sufficient to prevent racial discrimination. These are, of course, fine words, but it requires a considerable initiative to help individuals see every one as an individual member of the human race, rather than as a member of a group. However, until this can be achieved, neither any amount of recruitment from minority communities, nor the most successful campaign of idea generation from members of such communities, will remove the fundamental basis of the discrimination. Indeed, there have already been cases when members of some identifiable groups have been recruited into various services and have subsequently resigned because of internal discrimination.

3.1 Existing methods

Measures adopted in the past, such as banning the use of certain words in particular contexts, are doomed to fail, because they are founded on the belief that the word is the culprit, or at least, that the banning of the words will change the behaviour. However, one word is soon replaced by another, for example, where the word 'elderly' is substituted for 'old' it soon takes on the meaning of old and requires a new word to be defined to describe elderly people. In the same manner, banning discriminatory jokes does not achieve the desired result. If the joke is genuinely funny, then it will continue to be funny, no matter what the context. If, however, it is merely insulting, it will express the thoughts of those who discriminate. However, take away the fundamental basis for the discrimination and the racial element ceases to offend. In other words, the genuine humour will survive and the insulting element will cease to exist. What this exposes is that the most frequent methods of 'banning' racism are merely attacking the symptoms, rather than attacking the problem itself.

Another prescription that has proved popular is positive discrimination. However, this fails to eradicate the fundamental basis for group discrimination. Some examples of positive discrimination have already been discussed, such as increased recruitment from minority groups and seeking suggestions from minorities. These in themselves are not fundamentally bad, but the problem is that positive discrimination can lead to the assignment of resources on the basis of group difference, rather than on merit. The consequence of such assignments is that they may lead to disappointment, which will then reinforce existing, ill-founded beliefs about a group. The result is that far from reducing discrimination, any existing discrimination may be reinforced, possibly leading to the transformation of latent discrimination into overt discrimination. A particularly acute form of positive discrimination that is likely to exacerbate the existing situation involves the use of quotas. In some public services, for example, there is an organisational myth that a black, female, gay candidate will be selected for a post, no matter what the relative merits of the candidates. Although the myth may be completely groundless, it has the unfortunate consequence of reinforcing institutional discrimination.

3.2 A practical approach for organisations

In order to change organisational culture to eradicate racism, it is necessary to avoid the classification of individuals into groups. In an organisation, such as the police force, it is probably impossible to prevent the classification of individuals as members and non-members. However, within these two categories, it is essential that every member be treated as an individual rather than as a member of a sub-group. The persistence of sub-groups in either category will inevitably lead to a spread of the classification across the boarder, restoring institutional racism. A practical project to achieve this end must include the following elements:

- **Planning:** to ensure the project is well founded;
- **Transition:** to change the culture;
- **Maintenance:** to ensure that the culture change is sustained;
- **Induction:** to inculcate new recruits into the culture.

3.2.1 Planning

A sound plan will include objectives, methods, resources, timescales and milestones. If the plan is too ambitious it is likely to lead to failure. Therefore realistic objectives and timescales must be agreed beforehand. Culture change is a slow and laborious process and there are bound to be failures along the route. However, as long as the overall objectives are realistic and the failures are not considered as reasons for disciplinary action or triggers for the assignation of blame, realistic objectives can be achievable. Thus setbacks must be anticipated in the plan, together with contingencies for dealing with them. Some form of scenario planning may be appropriate for testing and fine tuning the plans.

3.2.2 Transition

The transition stage is where the new culture is established. It has already been pointed out that an open, blame-free culture will be necessary in order to ensure that the changes are cumulative and permanent. Many of the World's most successful companies have instituted a blame-free culture in order to encourage the development of new ideas. In this case, the development of ideas would need to be an iterative and continuing process. It is all very well to set out with a fixed plan of the way things need to be changed, but culture change is about dealing with fallible human beings, who may not react to planned stimuli in the intended manner. If new ideas and experimentation are encouraged, without the fear of blame, the project will have a greater probability of success. Of course, ideas and experiments need to be reasonable and rational, so some guidelines will be necessary in order to delineate the scope for individual actions. This is particularly so in an organisation where there is considerable scope for insensitivity to public perceptions and concerns. Thus there are two basic objectives of the transition phase:

- To create an open, blame-free culture where attitudes can be changed;
- To change attitudes of individuals to prevent assignment to groups which could be the subject of discrimination.

The first of these objectives may be particularly difficult for an organisation involved in enforcement activities. To achieve it requires commitment from the most senior people. It will involve an awareness campaign, education, training and active participation by all senior people. A particularly useful, but often painful, approach is the use of upward reporting. This involves feedback from juniors on how well their seniors are doing in the 'no blame' field. To be successful, it is essential that it should operate at all levels within an organisation. The emphasis should be on continuous improvement. There must be no difference between the espoused values of senior people and their actions as managers.

The second objective may be less painful to the existing culture, but involves greater complexity. It is necessary to demonstrate to individuals what beliefs they actually hold, together with the effects of their beliefs. This may involve a certain amount of training in a group environment and self-assessment by individuals. The role of the mentor can play an important part in the successful implementation of such attitude change programmes. Where there is genuine difficulty for individuals to achieve the correct attitudes, counselling should be available to determine the best way forward. It may be that in exceptional circumstances, retirement might be the best solution.

3.2.3 Maintenance

Maintenance is essentially an extension of the transition phase. The principle actions required here are continued self-assessment and appraisal. Once again a no blame culture is essential, so that individuals do not hide their attitudes and behaviours, leading to a return to a covert, old culture. The continuation of mentoring would be useful to help to encourage the right attitudes. One concern that may arise is that, where there are established enclaves of technical or departmental expertise, it might be difficult to achieve the desired level of change in the transition phase. This is sometimes addressed by limiting individuals to a maximum period of service in a given area. However, there can be a loss or dilution of technical expertise if this mechanism is over used. A more successful method, often used by the armed forces and within the service industries is to move people geographically within their speciality. This could involve seconding individuals to parallel organisations. There are two advantages of this arrangement. The first is that it ensures that entrenched ideas do not ferment in local pockets. It also ensures that best practice and experience has the greatest chance to propagate throughout the whole of the organisation.

3.2.4 Induction

The best method of carrying out induction into such a culture is to use mentoring in conjunction with initial training. Hence the role of mentors is seen as an important aspect of all stages of the project.

General eradication of racism

The eradication of racism within organisations is itself a difficult task. However, the eradication of racism within society as a whole is a much greater challenge. Within an organisation there is structure and, even in very large organisations, the numbers are limited to a few tens of thousands at most. All the ideas proposed in relationship to organisations still apply. The real difficulty is how to implement them in areas of society where group discrimination is endemic. In society generally there is no mechanism for implementing culture change. Indeed, the philosophy of group discrimination is an integral part of our social order. The members and supporters of political parties divide the world into them and us. Party supporters believe in the values of the party and attack and even ridicule those of other parties. Even within the parties, there are group associations, the "loony left", the "right wingers", the Euro-sceptics, etc. Within the realms of football, there are the supporters of "our team" and "the other lot". The academically successful often scorn the unqualified, while many manual workers consider academics and professionals as an unjustly privileged group. In fact, discrimination of one sort or another is endemic throughout society. It is little wonder then that racial discrimination is so commonplace, especially amongst those least equipped to understand its nature. So how then, are we to tackle it?

A Vision of the Future

If racial discrimination is to be tackled as a social malaise, it must be treated as part of the whole complex problem of group discrimination. This requires planning, foresight and cooperation from the media. Unfortunately, there are many sections of the media who have a vested interest in continuing to incite discrimination in one form or another. The only way to sell large numbers of newspapers or secure the best programme ratings is to appeal to people's ability to condemn others. Often this is not presented as group discrimination, but the effect is such that the public at large consider the subject of a particular attack as another one of "that lot". The concept of coercion has of course been well tried in totalitarian societies and the result is always the same: the outward suppression of discrimination, but the inward incitement of the same discrimination. The outcome, when the totalitarian regime collapses, is that the emerging discrimination is greater than that at the outset.

In the end, if discrimination is to be overcome, or at least significantly reduced, there needs to be a radical change in societal values. The objectives of organisational change still apply. We need to seek out a blame free culture, a less adversarial justice system, a political system which emphasis cooperation rather than confrontation. We need to get people of all backgrounds talking to others from different backgrounds. We must try to help people see others as individuals, rather than members of one group or another. This does not just apply to the great, silent majority. It applies to all groups. Even self-cohesive groups that are the subject of discrimination (and most such groups within society are discriminated against by someone) must come to terms with the needs of society as a whole to break away from the concept of the group as somehow describing the characteristics of individuals.

The only route to such a future is through sensitive and sensible negotiation between those who consider themselves as different to, or the same as, others in our society. This can never be an easy task. There will always be those who will perceive themselves to be right in their beliefs, even though the majority will regard these as mis-held. If we are to consider setting targets and quotas, perhaps they should be for the proportion of people who are weaned away from the current culture of confrontation and adversarial conflict. If our measurement of success is concerned with a reduction in the incidence of discrimination, rather than a redress for wrongs, a harmonisation of people with differences rather than a prescription for compulsion, then we may move nearer to success than we ever thought possible.

4 Conclusions

A theory of group discrimination has been developed. It has been demonstrated that it is sufficient and necessary to deal with the fundamental basis of discrimination. The formulation of the ideas into a coherent project plan is essential for a successful outcome in ridding the police force of institutional racism. The plan must include a continuation phase for maintaining the new culture and introducing new recruits.

The principal conclusions of this paper are that:

- Racial discrimination results from the division of society into groups;
- The assignation of individuals to groups leads to false assumptions about them;
- Methods which do not deal with the grouping problem are unsound;
- In order to change attitudes it is necessary to change the culture;
- The culture must be open and blame free to encourage honest assessment;
- Implementation must be planned to a realistic time scale;
- Failures and setbacks must be expected and planned for;
- Harmony and consent are better than confrontation.