

Anti-racism or cultural competence?

Issues for service delivery in an increasingly plural society

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Where do we currently stand? Britain as a plural society

- Having experienced a period of rapid economic growth in the aftermath of the second world war
- Britain's long-established reservoirs in Ireland and Eastern Europe could not meet the demand for additional labour
 - so migrant workers began to be drawn in from the Caribbean, South Asia, Africa and China
- The outcome of those developments is now plain to see
 - The social and cultural character of British society has been transformed
- Ours is now a much more overtly plural society in which 10% of the population is now of non-European ancestry

However this condition of plurality is far from uniform

- Plurality is much more of an urban than a rural phenomenon
 - Most members of the minorities are still overwhelmingly concentrated close to those areas in which pioneers settlers initially established residential bridgeheads
- Hence most of Britain's industrial town and cities now contain a whole series of ethnic colonies
 - In which Jamaicans, Kittians, Azad Kashmiris, Punjabi Sikhs, Gujarati Hindus, Sylhetis and many others have coagulated together on their own terms
- Although originally located in inner city areas, by no means all these colonies have remained spatially static
 - As their members have become more prosperous, so they have moved steadily towards the suburbs,
 - following very similar trajectories to those traversed by their Jewish and Irish predecessors

A numerical perspective

- By 2001 rather more than 4 million Britons were of non-European origins, and numbers are still rising rapidly
 - partly as a result of continuing immigration
 - partly because of a large excess of births over deaths

<i>Ethno-national origins</i>	<i>1961</i>	<i>1971</i>	<i>1981</i>	<i>1991</i>	<i>2001</i>
India	81,400	240,730	673,704	823,821	1,028,539
Pakistan	24,900	127,565	295,461	449,646	706,752
Bangladesh	—	—	64,562	157,881	275,250
East Africa	—	44,860	181,321	—	—
Total South Asian population	106,300	413,155	1,215,048	1,431,348	2,010,541
% of South Asians in UK population	0.23%	0.85%	2.52%	3.04%	4.00%

Table 1 The Growth of the South Asian presence in the UK 1961 – 2001

What are the consequences of these developments?

- Most British cities are now multi-racial
 - the local population includes a significant number of people who are readily identifiable by virtue of their physical appearance
 - and hence acutely vulnerable to racial exclusion
- However this is by no means the only way in which the minorities differ from the majority
- Their presence has also introduced some equally salient dimensions of culturally plurality into British society
 - in the sense that members of different sections of any given local population utilise widely differing social, cultural, religious and linguistic traditions to organise their behaviour
 - especially in personal and domestic contexts

The Challenge of Plurality

- This condition of ethnic plurality
- Which is distinct from – although closely connected to – the phenomenon of racial/physiological diversity
- Is now a major challenge for social policy – and most especially to virtually all forms of public service delivery
- And it is this challenge – rather than that of racial exclusion – which is my central concern today

but just what is the nature of that challenge?

how are the issues best conceptualised?

and how might we best begin to resolve them?

Possible solutions in plural societies

- Repatriate the minorities?
- Control immigration more firmly?
- Look forward to swift assimilation to eliminate the problem?
 - Will this process of assimilation happen of its own accord?
 - Should assimilation/"community cohesion" be encouraged as a matter of public policy?
 - Or is plurality here to stay?
- Our central current dilemma:
 - Should the goal of public policy be to minimise the extent of cultural plurality and/or confine it wholly to the private domain?
 - in which case plurality can safely be ignored
 - Or is it more realistic to acknowledge that plurality is here to stay?
 - If so, how are we going to learn to live more comfortably with difference?
 - How are we going to make the necessary adjustments to our public institutions?
 - And how are we going to cope with the popular backlash which suggests that plurality undermines the integrity of the established social order?

Established policies

- To date the central concern of public policy has been the elimination of racial discrimination
- But however welcome the Race Relations Act may be
 - It has not eliminated the practice of racial exclusionism
 - especially in the professional sector of the labour market
 - worse still it has next to nothing to say about issues of cultural and ethnic plurality
- Which will have no part whatsoever to play in the agenda of the up-and-coming Equalities Commission
 - Hence even though MacPherson, Parekh and Ouseley have all argued that cultural difference is as much of an issue as is 'racial' difference
 - and that the consequent inadequacies in service delivery are at least as significant as those in recruitment and selection
- The current Whitehall priority is simply to 'eliminate segregation' and to 'reinforce community cohesion'

What is 'Community Cohesion'?

1. At the simplest level:

- Something characteristic of a society in which all its members hang together in a single community
- Because they all use the same social, linguistic, cultural and moral conventions

2. But what if some people differ? Two views are possible

- i. Such difference is a threat to social integrity: community cohesion requires its elimination
- ii. Difference is a *de facto* reality: the greater the efforts made to suppress difference, the more determined those who differ will be to sustain their difference

If so, it follows that the real challenge is not to build a single coherent community,
but to establish a *modus vivendi* between coherent communities

Is this realistic? What does it actually entail?

- An ethnically plural society is one which contains
 - At least two (but often many more) distinctive communities
 - Whose members each employ their own preferred cultural, religious (and sometimes linguistic) conventions
 - To organise their personal, domestic and leisure activities
 - And very often aspects of their public behaviour as well
- In other words a plural society is still a single social order
 - It could be nothing else
- Even if it is an order which is not culturally homogenous

Are plural societies inherently fragmented?

- They can be: arranging a non-conflictual outcomes in conditions of plurality can be very challenging
 - Nevertheless a society which is composed of several different components
 - Each of which has an equal status within the whole
 - Is perfectly easy to conceive
 - Switzerland and Canada are two obvious examples of societies which are explicitly plural in this sense
- Meanwhile formerly plural societies which get it wrong
 - Such as India, Sri Lanka, Yugoslavia, Palestine and Rwanda and many more
- Have all become exceedingly unhappy places

What about *successful* plural societies?

1. Whist such societies necessarily have at least *some* common social conventions
 - So, for example everyone has to agree whether they are going to drive their cars on the left- or the right-hand side of the road
2. However their citizens also routinely accept that many other conventions are *not* shared in this way
 - So there may be two or more official languages
 - Two or more religious systems
 - Two or more sets of conventions about the organisation of family life
 - All of which are formally accorded equal status

Examples of officially pluralism can already be found in Britain

- Wales has two official languages
- Ulster has recently gained a carefully balanced institutional structure
 - Which gives equal weight to both the Loyalist and the Republican traditions
- Even England was forced to accept a plural schooling system for Catholic children
 - Although this is largely forgotten in the context of current debates about the legitimacy of Muslim schools

But are societies which are *de facto* plural necessarily plural in *de jure* terms?

- Evidently not:
 - When a society contains a number of ethnic components
 - But where some of these components have a manifestly subordinate status
 - That society may be *de facto* plural, whilst being profoundly unequal in jural terms
- Apartheid South Africa was a clear example
 - All non-white people, together with their social, cultural and linguistic institutions
 - were officially classified inferior
- In the interest, ironically enough, of 'community cohesion'
- A fully plural society is one in which
 - i. there is a broad equality of power between all its component parts
 - ii. there is broad equality of respect for all its component cultural traditions

Where do we stand in contemporary Britain?

- In some senses ours is already a plural society
 - each of the UK's component kingdoms now has its own parliamentary base
 - So Scotland, Wales and Ulster now enjoy an increasing degree of autonomy
 - And have also begun to introduce pluralistic measures of their own
- However the extent of this pluralism is still limited:
- As ever, London and the English still claim – and expect to enjoy – a position of hegemony viz-a-viz everyone else

Is this an 'English problem'?

- Although England's historical origins are strongly plural
 - The outcome of a creole admixture between Celtic, Anglo-Saxon and Norman-French traditions
- Ever since the Henrician reformation England and the English have been strongly committed to an ideal of national homogeneity
 - With a powerful focus on common loyalty
 - to the Crown,
 - to the Anglican Church,
 - and to Parliament
 - As the ultimate test of a 'free-born Englishman'

But how far was this homogeneity real or imagined?

- One doesn't have to look far to realise that despite a strong popular commitment to an ideal of homogeneity
- Diversity has long been a feature of England's post-reformation social order
 - As in the case of the recusant Catholics
 - the Huguenots
 - the Jews
 - The Traveller-Gypsies
- Hence whilst English society has long been *de facto* plural
- Although huge efforts have long been made to sweep conceptual and jural recognition of diversity under the carpet

So what was the status of these 'invisible' minorities?

- Prior to 'emancipation' at the beginning of the nineteenth century
- Anyone who refused to swear an oath of allegiance to the Anglican church and Crown
 - Which were deliberately framed in such a way that neither Jews nor Catholics could possibly consider doing without compromising their faith
- Was regarded as disloyal to the established order
- And was therefore formally excluded
 - from public offices of all kinds
 - from most of the professions
 - and from Oxford and Cambridge Universities
- Do such 'loyalty tests' sound rather familiar?

New dimensions of pluralism

- Ethnic diversity is by no means a novel phenomenon in Britain
- However the new minorities differ from their predecessors in two vital respects
 1. they are visible rather than invisible
 - and are consequently much easier targets for exclusion
 2. their ancestral linguistic, cultural and religious traditions are even less familiar to members of the indigenous majority
 - and are consequently much more easily dismissed as alien and 'uncivilized'

What are the consequences of all this?

- Deliverers of public and professional services in urban Britain
 - be they teachers, policemen, social workers, nurses, psychologists, audiologists, doctors, probation officers and lawyers
- Now routinely find that a minority of their clientele
 - and in some areas a majority of their clientele
- Put their domestic and personal lives together in terms of values and conventions with which they themselves are wholly unfamiliar
 - And about whom they have been taught next to nothing in the course of their training
- In these circumstances it should come as no surprise that when required to provide a service to a client drawn from one or other of these communities
 - They frequently find themselves wholly unable to carry out their assigned professional task

When this occurs, what options are available?

1. Wait for – or at least encourage – one's clients to learn English, and more generally to learn to behave in a more 'acceptable' way?
 - Not only is such a wait likely to be very lengthy
 - It also imposes a test of cultural conformity on one's clients as a prerequisite to providing them with access to public services
 - For which, as taxpayers, they have already paid
2. Look for an interpreter?
 - But who is going to undertake that task?
 - The children?
 - A professional interpreter?
3. Or do practitioners simply rely on muddling through
 - Whilst constantly looking over their shoulders in case anyone should accuse them of racism

Just why do these problems loom so large?

- Some vital questions:
 - Is it realistic to expect clients to change to meet the expectations of the service?
 - Or is it incumbent upon service deliverers to change to their practices to meet the needs of its clients?
- If so, just what does the implementation of such changes entail?
 - How far does it entail a *moral* change of heart
 - “cease your racism forthwith, you miserable sinner!”
 - or is the central issue one of *professional competence*?
 - and hence one which arises as a result of their lack of relevant skills rather than of moral inadequacy?
- But if it is indeed the latter, how do we get over the inevitable objections?

Objections, objections

- “its far to difficult”
- “I can’t be expected to learn all the 150 languages spoken in this Borough”
- “we are already so busy we can’t cope with any more burdens”
- “they are only a minority, anyway!”
- “they don’t bother us; why should we bother them?”
- “they are really very good at sorting their own trouble’s out”
- “why should they get special privileges when our people don’t”
- “why should we be expected to do any of this when we’ve had no training?”
- “our language assistant is ever so nice, she really gets a lot of things sorted out”

What should we make of all this?

- Some of these arguments
 - Such as those which suggest that cultural conformity is a prerequisite for access to public services
 - and that public recognition of minority distinctiveness is an unfair and unacceptable privilege
- are blatantly exclusionist
 - and hence should be dismissed as such
- however other aspects of these arguments have much more substance

What are the implications of cultural plurality for effective professional practice?

- As far as I am aware, few if any, professional training courses pay any significant attention to issues of cultural plurality
 - This is not because they are 'culturally neutral'
 - But rather because they assume as a matter of course that practitioners and their clients routinely operate within the same conceptual universe
- So much so that the specific nature of that universe requires no specific scrutiny
- In other words it is assumed that all the issues of meaning and value inherent to that universe
 - can simply be taken for granted
- The result is plain to see
 - in virtually all professional disciplines issues of cultural diversity have been rendered wholly invisible

Cultural competence

- I'm not suggesting that established conventions of professional competence are a-cultural
 - But rather that they have been constructed in such a way as to be culture-blind
- In other words they have been designed for use within a specific particular cultural context, whose background presence is taken for granted
- As a result the distinction between
 - Professional competence and cultural competence
- Has simply disappeared from view
 - There is quite literally no space to get one's head around the difference within the conceptual framework so generated
- For those who live within a two-dimensional world
- The possibility of a third dimension is quite literally unthinkable

Coming to terms with plurality

- If this is so, no wonder those faced with an ethnically plural clientele find the task so challenging
 - they immediately grasp the wrong end of the stick!
- In the face of the otherness of alters
- They assume that alterity is itself is the source of the problems they encounter
 - rather than the ethnocentricity of their own taken-for-granted personal and professional understandings
- So much so that it is their clients, rather than the professionals themselves, who all too often come to be identified as the source of all the problems they face

So what is cultural competence?

- An ability to interact professionally with one clients on their own terms
 - Regardless of one's own personal linguistic, cultural and conceptual predilections
 - And of any similarly grounded predilections which have been built into one's taken for granted modes of professional practice
- Why is this so important?
- In the absence of such a capacity
 - Professionals are likely to misinterpreted their clients strengths as weaknesses
 - to adjudge potential solutions as problems
 - And to systematically overlook the real problems with which their clients find themselves confronted
- Hence lack of cultural competence almost inevitably leads to inadequate professional practice
 - No matter how 'anti-racist' the intentions of the practitioner may be

How difficult is it to acquire such competence?

- Far less than is commonly assumed!
- It does **not** entail having an omniscient knowledge of all languages, all cultures and all religions
- Instead it is primarily a matter of awareness
 - i. that one's own personal predilections are culturally coded
 - ii. that the established conventions of professional practice are also culturally coded
 - iii. as are the expectations and conventions of the institutional structure within which one practices
 - iv. and that if professionals uncritically deploy those taken-for-granted assumptions in assessing their clients and their difficulties
 - v. They will almost inevitably find their clients wanting as a result of their 'inappropriate' behaviour

If this is so, the way forward is relatively easy to discern

- Majority professionals need to become much more aware of their cultural groundedness of their own personal and professional presuppositions
 - And to free themselves up by becoming more at ease with alterity
- Minority professionals need to become more confident about highlighting the validity of such alternative perceptions
 - to be freed up to express their personal involvement in those alternative worlds without fear of instant mockery from their own professional colleagues
 - And must also be given space and time to explore how they can build upon their (largely unacknowledged) cultural competence to reconstruct their professional practice
- It's easy really, if we take the issues seriously
- However that goal still seems to be an exceedingly long way off

**More material on this theme can be
found at:**

www.casas.org.uk