Introduction to institutional racism

British retired judge Macpherson (in the 1999 report on the failure of police to properly investigate a racist murder) described institutional racism as:

> "The collective failure of an organisation to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture, or ethnic origin. It can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes and behaviour which amount to discrimination through *unwitting prejudice,* ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping which disadvantage minority ethnic people (italics inserted)."

When we say that racism is institutional, it does <u>not</u> mean that it is a form of racism that does not adversely affect individuals —it certainly does affect both the perpetrators of racism working in institutional structures *and* those affected by its outcome. The term was coined by Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton in their book *Black Power. The Politics of Liberation* that formed the backdrop to the (American) civil rights movement of the 1960. They explained how large numbers of African-Americans suffered untold misery as a result of institutional racism (in education, housing, health, and so on)—greater in numbers than those who suffered from direct racist violence. The people who ran these institutions were the (sometimes unwitting) perpetrators of racism; those affected were racial groups—*black people*. Unlike overt racism where there are specific incidents that can be identified as racist, it is often not easy to put a finger on exactly where institutional racism lies although many people affected by it *know* that it is there and *feel in their bones* that the actions or behaviour they experience are racist. On the whole, institutional racism is difficult to counteract and more dangerous in its outcomes than obvious face to face racial discrimination, because of its pervasiveness.

For hundreds of years racism was the driving force in the oppression and exploitation of large numbers of people and even of (racial) genocide. Until the mid-20th century, racism was more-or-less tolerated, even accepted, in most Western societies, especially by the nations that had been responsible for race-slavery of the Atlantic slave trade and race-based colonialism—Britain being prominent in both sectors. Then, as the horrors of the Jewish holocaust in central Europe came to light (anti-semitism is a form of racism) and the race-based European Empires fell, there was a realisation that racism had to be got rid of for human societies to flourish and, more importantly, that it is unethical. UNESCO issued a position statement, *The Race Question*, in 1950; and the UN passed an International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) in 1965. And some countries, like the UK, brought in anti-discriminatory laws. Overtly expressed racist behaviour became unfashionable, then something to be ashamed of, and finally the feeling developed that all civilised people should not indulge any longer in any form of racism.

As openly expressed racism seemed to diminish, 'political correctness' in discourse and anti-discriminatory legislation tended to cover-up the reality that racist *attitudes* persisted. *Racism went underground,* surviving in what could be called a 'hidden' racist *culture* of many

Western societies; and many Western institutions and systems maintained racism as *institutional* (or cultural) *racism*. It soon became evident that a racist culture was embedded in psychiatry and psychology as in many other sections of society.

In the 1960s, various forms of institutional racism began to be recognised as 'new racisms'—something described in social-scientific and historical literature. The book *Institutional racism in Psychiatry and Clinical Psychology* argues that the persistence of racism (even after racism was recognised as being against human rights and civilisation itself) may be attributable to the failure of Western societies to take on board a proper *reckoning* vis-à-vis the terrible events of the previous four hundred years or so, so that people in the West have never had the opportunity to face up to what needed to be done in terms of repairing relationships between the West (that had benefitted from those events) and 'the Rest', the peoples who had suffered most—the 'racial-other'. [The lack of a reckoning meant that there were no apologies, no attempts at restitution, no more than half-hearted regret and a reference to it being 'history'.] Since the 1960s or so, attempts to minimize overt forms of racism have been partially successful, but 'hidden', institutional racism has thrived. And from time to time, for example in times of social crisis, the underlying cultural racism has burst out into overt racism—for example with Trump and Brexit. Further, anti-racist movements that were active in the 1960s and 1970s have allowed complacency to develop, that racism was on the decline and will continue its downward path—something that proved to be an illusion.

In summary, institutional racism is a form of racism embedded in our general (British) *culture*, and so in the variety of *cultures* of (say) professional groups, social systems and so on that make up our larger society. This has allowed the accompanying notion (born through race-slavery and colonialism) of white supremacy, allied to the domination of a *whiteness* that promotes (white) privilege, (white) power and (white) knowledge as human norms of (say) 'civilisation', literature and so on to continue to dominate the thinking, not just of white people, but most of the world. So eradicating racism is not something to be done quickly or easily, not simply a matter of passing legislation although that may be a necessary starting point. Eradication really means dissipating a largely submerged iceberg—and all we have done so far is to camouflage the tip of this iceberg. It may be that (to change the metaphor) what we need to do is to dismantle the structure (of racism) one brick at a time dealing with the side effects of what happens when we do, appreciating the difficulties many of us have in adapting to change.

The aim of a study group set up by ROTA is to explore ways of combatting institutional racism in the mental health system; and more immediately, to focus on *legal changes* that can promote or force change. This conference is designed to work on ways of counteracting institutional racism in mental health services, by (for example) promoting *culture-change* in professional practice and safeguarding *human rights* of people who use mental health services or are caught up in the mental health system.

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