**Discrimination, poor mental health and mental illness**

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Abstract

Discrimination is a major public health issue. Discrimination is known and well recognised to be associated with poor physical and mental health, as well as creating social divisions and fear that undermine the success of society and economic progress. Policies to eradicate discrimination and prejudice in the public sphere, and in public life, need thoughtful and careful planning and engagement by all public institutions and in the way they conduct their business. This forms the basis of social justice. Employers, politicians and public servants as well as other stakeholders irrespective of their professional status all have ethical responsibilities to uphold such actions and policies, values and supporting behaviours, as a core principle of successful societies.

*Key words: discrimination, mental health, political leadership, public health*

Introduction

Discrimination is known to be associated with a higher cumulative risk of depression, anxiety, and even psychosis ([Bhui *et al.*, 2005](#_ENREF_6), [Wallace *et al.*, 2016](#_ENREF_22)) ([Veling *et al.*, 2008](#_ENREF_19), [Veling *et al.*, 2007](#_ENREF_20)), yet the notion that interpersonal prejudice and emotionally hurtful interactions can cause illness is not generally accepted. So what is the nature of prejudice and discrimination that is noxious and makes people ill? Discrimination and prejudice perhaps have negative impact through the exercise of power relationships, and unfair infliction of personally insulting or derogatory acts that devalue or diminish self worth in the individual being victimised. These ways of being treated provoke feelings of low self esteem and powerlessness, and at the same time feelings of anger, sadness, and worry, especially if the perpetrator exercises control and power over the victim, for example, an employer or a parent on whom a child is reliant or a carer on whom a vulnerable persona is reliant. However, strangers can also demonstrate hostility through acts of verbal and physical assault, making use of race, religion, skin colour, appearance, sexuality, or any other identity characteristics. The importance of the identity characteristic is that it defines the individual’s sense of self and personhood, and is associated with a sense of belonging to a group of peers that share that identity characteristic, or it may define the way the are perceived to belong to such a group, or it may reflect preferences, choices and cultural practices that are cherished as part of their heritage or evolving personal or sexual identity. Denigrating that characteristic is therefore hurtful, and emotionally challenging as an attack on the individual and in some instances others with the same identity characteristic.

Internalised stigma is an alternative way of describing the experience if absorbing a poor self-image as if the things said or proposed as attacks are true, making the victim feel less worthy. Yet the term ‘stigma’ does not capture the primitive and sometimes harrowing quality of the traumatic experience of discrimination, which tends to disrupt rational thinking and attempts to make sense of the experience, further disempowering individual coping, especially in the absence of an opportunity to be part of collective action to counteract group based discrimination ([Perez-Garin *et al.*, 2016](#_ENREF_16)). Bullying, for example, includes the exercise of power and hurtful statements as well as physical violence, or of intimidation instilling fearfulness ([Okechukwu *et al.*, 2014](#_ENREF_14)). Thus work place stress can be increased and lead to anxiety and depressive states, work related stress and sickness absence ([Wadsworth *et al.*, 2007](#_ENREF_21)). Fear and traumatic reactions, if recurrent experiences, may become maladaptive or an unhelpful responses that are cultivated by the perpetrator to exercise power. Over the long term these responses can become patterns of behaviour that form the character of the individual, or of the group and family ([Infurna *et al.*, 2016](#_ENREF_10)). For example, this is the experience of traumatised children and adolescents, especially if exposed to violence or sexual abuse, later leading to impulsiveness and emotionally dysregulation as part of personality difficulties. Social distance can predispose individuals to adopt hierarchical relationship styles that make them more likely to act in a power-relationship that is hurtful to another, but good knowledge and practice of work placed employment policies and of working with difference and in teams should help reduce the chances of this ([Reynolds *et al.*, 2007](#_ENREF_17)). Ways of responding to discrimination and prejudice are also evolved, and tested, and applied productively if there is some learning from experience, and the capacity and flexibility to learn are not overwhelmed by intense emotional reactions of anger, hostility, victimhood, or of low self worth and expectations of failure.

Some argue that adversity is common and necessary as an experience that motivates growth, and that it necessitates a new way of coping and fosters resilience. So experiences of prejudice and discriminatory, especially if subtle and out of character, can be opportunities to learn about oneself and others perceptions about the relationship, albeit some instances are linked to political ideologies and more primitive expressions of group hostility on the assumption of superiority or for fear of competition. It is not uncommon to find examples of inter-group hostility, be it related to immigrants for example, in the recent BREXIT debate, or to a fear that deprived neighbourhoods are home to criminals and warring gangs, and drug dealers making such places unsafe.

Those studying racism and discrimination have developed theories of what racism is and how it operates, showing noxious attitudes exist, are more prevalent than is thought, and survive in populations even if not expressed overtly ([Bhugra and Bhui, 1999](#_ENREF_2), [McKenzie and Bhui, 2007](#_ENREF_12)). Yet enactments of such attitudes, leading to discrimination in action rather than thought or word, remain a risk factor for poor mental health ([Karlsen *et al.*, 2005](#_ENREF_11)) ([Bhui *et al.*, 2012](#_ENREF_5)). Even low levels of discrimination or micro-aggressions ([Nadal, 2011](#_ENREF_13)) can, for example, have biological effects like greater cellular aging ([Chae *et al.*, 2016](#_ENREF_7)) and be harmful ([Ong *et al.*, 2013](#_ENREF_15)).

Acts of blatant racism are now uncommon, for example, insults about skin colour, or smells or food and clothes choices; yet subtle forms of symbolism as captured in film, theatre, and everyday news can reinforce historical, social and perhaps unconscious stereotypes. For example, the film East is East, or My Beautiful Laundrette, born of 1980s Britain as well established phenomena that seem to emerge at times of social unrest and transition, as witnessed recently in the UK when hostility towards migrants seems to be galvanised by the desire of the British public to leave the EU. The arguments of such hostile reactions include that EU migrants to the UK, and non-EU migrants to a lesser extent, are perceived to be displacing British citizens form jobs, education, housing and transforming societal and national identity; all these of course are long standing mythical beliefs invested with survival sentiments, reinforced by economic conditions that are not being tackled by the British government. Yet, the greatest surprise of the BREXIT decision is that level of anti-immigrant feeling, hostility and frank discrimination and racism that is now expressed in England and enacted, with reports of violent assaults on the increase. This shows how latent discriminatory attitudes are easily released to become more noxious and contagious through misplaced and historic notions of entitlement, desire and destiny, the stuff of which racism is made. A so called high income country with a civilised society, has for years eroded the protections against racism and human rights, even seeking to leave the human rights commitments in the EU and then claiming to seek control and restrict immigration as a main driver for being elected. At the same time, the parties of the middle appear to be vanishing, and the political climate is one of extremist polarities, and rather poor behavioural models whereby politicians can wilfully mislead with impunity. Delivering Race Equality was a policy established in 2005 and ran for five years to 2010 in order to tackle ethnic and racial inequalities of experience in NHS mental health services, yet the very aim of the programme was undermined by protest from many quarters about the lack of attention to other identity groups, and that mental health professionals were being accused of racism, as if the notion of structural or systemic processes in enactments of discrimination could not be understood or apprehended, or were not sufficiently nuanced to address the real experiences and dilemmas of patients and professionals ([Bhui *et al.*, 2012](#_ENREF_5)).

In England and Wales, living conditions have fallen, pensioners are seeing their savings devalued; young people fear a future without employment, homes or opportunities that were available in Europe. These conditions are conducive to seeking scapegoats and explanation for unhappiness and lack of success, especially if the outgroup is perceived to be benefitting.

The recent BREXIT vote saw a series of leaders resign, rather than take a principled position to offer hope and a clear set of actions to bolster the economy, rid the future political debates of hostility and xenophobia, and guarantee that rude barracking and unpleasant bullying that is endemic through parliamentary privilege does not leak out as a form of condoned behaviour that is then emulated by the politically naïve and vulnerable. Should politicians not recognise the radicalising influence they have on citizens who feel alienated, disenfranchised and politically ineffective. We know politically unwelcoming (euphasism intended) environments – discrimination against migrants- can lead mental illnesses and poorer states of health ([Beiser and Hou, 2016](#_ENREF_1)). These effects of inequality may extend to poor physical health including heart disease and cancer ([Hollander, 2013](#_ENREF_9)). The social web of causation of disease includes multiple social determinants and adversity and this interacts with biological vulnerability, powerlessness and minority status to create risks of disease and behaviours that are not healthy, invoking the notion of syndemics as a way of understanding the impact of multiple adversity linked to disempowered minorities ([Coulter *et al.*, 2015](#_ENREF_8), [Valentine *et al.*, 2015](#_ENREF_18)). So discrimination and prejudice are in fact noxious for health, social cohesion and societal success. Although we have guidelines for better care of migrants and their mental health ([Bhugra *et al.*, 2011](#_ENREF_3), [Bhugra *et al.*, 2014](#_ENREF_4)) these appear to be understood by professionals but not by the public at large and nor by politicians. Social divisions, a lack of appreciation and value of mutual dependency and the expectation of no social support or fair treatment, erode trust leading to widespread health difficulties and violence in society. Action must be taken both in a public health context, including local and national governments, to clearly lay out and enforce legal protections against racism and discrimination in the public space, and all leaders, including managers in all public institutions. Not least, politicians should not model or seek privileged positions from which to present erroneous arguments and facts to the public as if accurate information upon which the public might legitimately vote, thinking they are exercising their democratic rights, but ill informed of the misinformation and lack of evidence to back up the assertions being made. Governance and leadership require integrity and need to be evidence based and less opinion based. Anything other than such an approach will exploit and further trigger a common human failing to resort to prejudice and stereotypes and primitive expressions of inter-group competitive rivalry. Are the ways politicians behave in the public sphere conducive to a socially cohesive and exemplary democratic society, in which justice and integrity, human rights and dignity, can sit alongside pride about our shared human dilemmas and dependency which seem to be provoke some into isolationist positions for the sake of autonomy and nationalism, and an imagined and revered past as if this fulfils a future destiny.

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