

# DO RACIAL DISPARITIES EQUAL RACIAL DISCRIMINATION?

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## INTRODUCTION

Different racial and ethnic groups in the UK experience different life outcomes—in terms of employment, income, life expectancy, imprisonment, mental health issues and so on. Most ethnic groups experience worse economic outcomes than the white majority, but not all do and several increasingly outperform the white majority.

The most common explanation for racial disparities in life outcomes is that ethnic minorities are subject to racial discrimination. It is argued that the game is rigged in favour of the white majority. If discrimination was reduced, we would see fewer disparities between groups. This view is criticised for its oversimplification and inability to explain minority groups' success, especially when it acts as a blanket explanation for disparities. We misidentify problems and possible solutions when we ignore that differences in group outcomes can have complex and multifaceted causes. Discrimination is often a factor, but it might not be the only one or even the most important one.

## THE PROPOSITION

On average ethnic minorities experience higher rates of unemployment, are more likely to be employed in less desirable jobs and earn less than the white majority. Most of the ethnic groups in the UK experience what social scientists often term the 'ethnic penalty'. This is the difference in life outcomes between an ethnic minority group and the white majority and is conceived of as a 'penalty' because these differences are unjust and are taken to be the result of racist behaviour.

If we believe in the inherent equality of all humans, then we should expect to see roughly similar outcomes across all groups. The fact that we do not, it is claimed, suggests that some groups have been discriminated against.

Racial discrimination does exist in the UK. The two most damning bodies of evidence are the continued existence of hiring discrimination and the continued self-reportage by ethnic minority individuals of racial abuse and workplace discrimination. The well-attested existence of hiring discrimination is the phenomenon that ethnic minority applicants have to send more job applications



that than white applicants to receive positive responses from employers, even when applying with identical CVs and credentials. This evidence is supplemented by studies that show high numbers of ethnic minority workers reporting experiences of racial discrimination and harassment at work. Both getting onto and climbing the job ladder are harder, on average, for minority groups than the white majority.

One of the central issues in the UK is why sustained improvements in the educational attainment of some ethnic minority groups have not necessarily translated into equally sustained improvements in labour market outcomes (though there has been some improvement). Hiring discrimination is a core issue but a more holistic approach to racial disparities needs to consider "the related roles of occupational choices and outcomes, pay and career progression, and family roles and responsibilities".

Campaigners point to the legacy of past racial discrimination as a significant cause for current racial disparities. Even if the situation were to be improving in the present moment, we still inherit problems caused by past actions. The majority white population still acts, as the argument runs, on the basis of stereotypes created centuries ago about non-white groups. Similarly, while the UK has anti-discrimination laws, the continued existence of racial disparities is evidence that these were insufficient in their aim to make for an equal society.

It is desirable to be precise about where discrimination might be taking place. Often we treat the symptom (the disparity) rather than the cause which can lead to the mislabelling of disparities within particular institutional settings as discriminatory. An illuminating example is how Caribbean Britons are treated by mental health services. As a group, they were more likely than white Britons to be sectioned, forcefully restrained or placed in solitary confinement and are a disproportionately large percentage of patients in psychiatric wards. The racial discrimination argument explains this outcome as a result, say, of the racial biases of those working in mental health services (e.g. by having negative stereotypes about black men being more violent or unhinged or by stressing that the overwhelming majority of mental health staff are white). The critics of this argument will point to the higher incidence of mental illness amongst the black British population compared to white Britons, and seek to redress the causes of the wider social fact instead.

## COMPLICATING THE PICTURE

To make the point that racial disparities might have causes other than racial discrimination is not to say that racial discrimination is not a cause of the racial disparity. It is to argue that simply equating disparity with discrimination is simplistic and leads to inaccurate diagnoses and unhelpful prescriptions.

The key arguments against believing that all racial disparity is the result of racial discrimination are:





- (a) the existence of disparities between ethnic minority groups themselves and,
- (b) the fact that several minority groups outperform the white British majority. We ignore those disparities in which supposedly discriminated-against groups outperform the oppressing majority group (e.g. British Indians, Chinese, Asian and white mixed-race individuals and white Irish workers all earn more than the average white Briton).

The existence of differing outcomes between ethnic minority groups may indicate factors at play beyond racial discrimination, even if the minority group has experienced racism.

'Anti-Racism' campaigners often respond by claiming this indicates different levels of discrimination towards different minority groups, e.g. that black Britons experienced worse stereotyping than Indian Britons. They also stress the need to maintain the coherence of the Anti-Racism movement against the fracturing that might occur if certain ethnic minority groups perceive themselves as successful. This latter conclusion is an odd one to draw, and an alternative take might be to focus on what the better-performing groups are doing and try to imitate it.

The argument that the existence of racial disparities necessarily indicates the presence of current racial discrimination is criticised for ignoring the role of cultural differences between groups. This criticism is very contentious and leads to accusations of victim-blaming and denying the overwhelming force of racism. Conversely, its proponents claim that it offers ethnic minority groups evidence of ways out of poorer economic outcomes. The oft-cited 'success ladder' of getting educated, getting married and delaying having children until solid income is secured is good advice for anyone. The role of cultural and demographic factors are taboo subjects but they inevitably have an effect on outcomes—how many hours of homework a child does per day varies enormously amongst ethnic groups in the US regardless of socio-economic status but is key to subsequent life chances.

Cultural, demographic, economic and situational factors matter. The black American social scientist Wilfred Reilly uses a simple example to make this point. The median white American man earns more than the median black American man. This is often taken to suggest the existence of systemic racial discrimination, but the inclusion of just one further variable (i.e. age) changes the picture entirely. The median age for a black man in the US is 27, whereas for a white man it is 58. Older people tend to earn more than younger people and this goes some way to explaining the disparity between two racial groups. Reilly's most striking contention is that in 21st century America, once you adjust for all relevant variables, "most of the gaps that are attributed to racism just vanish". The picture may vary in the UK given our different demographic make-up.

## MULTICULTURALISM AND SHARED IDENTITY

The claim that racial disparities are the result of racial discrimination raises conceptual questions about how we think about multicultural societies. If we believe that we should

live in societies made up of distinct cultures, we should expect different life outcomes for each of those groups. Different attitudes on female employment or the desired number of children will have an effect on a family's finances. Our belief that we can live in multicultural societies and yet expect equality of outcomes is paradoxical unless we do not believe that those cultural differences are really meaningful.

The other conceptual criticism offered against a simplistic notion that disparity is the result of discrimination is that the notion is premised on belief that equality of outcome for all groups within society is the natural way of things. The existence of disparity is prima facie evidence of unfairness. This claim has no basis in human history: in all civilisations, different groups have had different outcomes. The expectation of equality is a utopian goal, unless it involves flattening out the differences between ethnic groups to the extent such distinctions no longer exist. Critics of the racial disparities = racial discrimination argument often raise concerns that 'equality' could only be achieved through illiberal means and claim that the record of interventionist policies (such as affirmative action in the US) are not great. The big conclusion here is that we could completely rid society of racial discrimination and yet still have stark racial disparities.

## MOVING FORWARD

Public debate over the issues discussed in this guide have often proved very contentious and, as an inevitable consequence, unenlightening. The problem with reducing the issue of disparate outcomes down to discrimination versus culture is that it ignores the multivariate character of most human phenomena. Things are complicated. The point here would not be to deny the existence of racial discrimination nor to abandon the search for effective practical means of reducing discrimination. It is to suggest, however, that the focus on discrimination is not the only or even the best means for improving the lot of ethnic minorities in the UK.

The point here is definitely not that racial discrimination is not a problem. Clearly, the fairness and harmony of an increasingly multiracial Britain is one of the challenges of the twenty-first century. But it is an expression of concern that believing complete equality of outcomes between groups is possible and desirable opens the door to regressive and authoritarian policies, where reality is deemed as optional. We might also think of the points made in this guide not as in conflict, but as complementary. Critics of the disparity = discrimination argument are concerned that the anti-racism movement is moving into an illiberal phase, and wish to challenge this, but do not wish to challenge attempts to reduce discrimination. This is a really contentious issue and one way to soften the edges of the discussion is to stress that to hold one position is not to deny the truth of the other.

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