

# Racial Trauma Guidance



**TACKLING  
RACIAL  
INEQUALITY**  
Working Group

**LONDON  
COUNCILS**

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# Introduction and Context

The London local government Tackling Racial Inequality programme has been driving regional action and activity across the sector to create positive change within our organisation. During the programmes 'Harnessing our Black, Asian and Multi-Ethnic Communities Talent' event, panellists and the audience explored the issue of racial trauma, focusing particularly on the lack of understanding and support available within our organisations.

Racial trauma is an issue that is often uncovered or avoided, both generally and specifically, in a workplace context. To explore this further the programme held a session with Professor Patrick Vernon OBE and agreed on key next steps to support boroughs and partners to build their understanding of racial trauma.

This guidance seeks to provide a cursory definition of racial trauma, share and build an understanding of the experiences of racial trauma and provide suggestions around what support organisations can provide within existing structures. During this exploratory stage, the Tackling Racial Inequality programme is not looking to launch new initiatives, however, we would be interested to hear about good practices from local authorities and partners in this space – please contact [Julie Foy](#) and [Musrat Zaman](#) to share this practice.

# Defining Racial Trauma

Racial trauma is not a tangible issue or experience that can be easily defined – it is fluid and constantly evolving; it manifests in different ways and invokes different reactions based on the individual’s own experiences. To reflect this, the guidance does not seek to establish a single definition, rather it seeks to provide a degree of support to help build our understanding.

Racial trauma is the mental and emotional injury caused by encounters with racial and cultural bias, ethnic discrimination, racism and hate crimes. There’s no universal definition of racial trauma and the term can be used as a catch-all for the effects that encountering racism and discrimination can have on how we think, feel and behave. Racial trauma is not specific to any particular ethnic group, skin colour or cultural identity and it often intersects with other aspects of identity which experience different forms of discrimination, such as gender, faith, sexuality and more. Please note that where resources reference specific groups this language is the choice of the scholar and this document intends to include all spheres of racial trauma, broadly speaking, anything that prevents an individual or a group’s ability to show up as their authentic self in the workplace.

It is important to distinguish that racial trauma is not currently considered a mental health disorder. It is a mental injury that can occur as the result of living within a racist system and environment or experiencing events of racism. However, it must also be recognised that experiences of racism can make people more likely to develop mental health problems.

Racialised trauma can come directly from other people or be experienced within a wider system – this is not purely about the individual or isolated experiences of racism or discrimination in the workplace, it is about cumulative experiences, barriers, challenges and oppression:

- Vicarious trauma - This is when hearing or seeing someone else’s experience of racism incites trauma. It may also bring back painful memories of an individual’s own experiences.
- Historical trauma (or historical loss) - Traumatic feelings from the realisation of how a racial group has been oppressed over time.

Intergenerational trauma - This is a new field of study exploring how racial trauma can get passed down in families across generations.

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***“Racial trauma is the consequence of racism on Black and Brown people, such as emotional, psychological and post-traumatic stress, which ultimately impacts individual self-esteem, mental well-being, physical health and cultural identity”***

***Professor Patrick Vernon OBC***

# What Does Racial Trauma Look Like?

Some or all the symptoms below may be present in someone with racial trauma and symptoms can look different across different cultural and ethnic groups. It may also manifest within working environments, having an impact on productivity, confidence, and representation and contributing to a lack of psychological safety in the workplace.

## Feeling associated with racial trauma

- Loneliness or isolation
- Anxiety, fear and lack of safety
- Anger or frustration
- Stress
- Suppression
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Confusion (racial gaslighting)

## Racial trauma can present in the following ways:

- Depression
- Anxiety
- Recurring thoughts of the event
- Physical reactions, such as headaches, sweating and insomnia
- Hypervigilance or hyperarousal
- Low self esteem
- Mental distancing from triggering situations
- Internalised racism and internalised colourism

## How structures exasperate or present racial trauma (non-exhaustive)

- Intentionally or unintentionally excluding Black, Asian and Multi-Ethnic staff in official and unofficial practices
- Institutionalised racism in policies, practices, teaching and decision-making at all levels of the organisation
- Maintaining the dominant group's power and privilege
- Acceptance of the status quo
- Scapegoating the 'transgressors'
- Cultural and political assimilation
- Enactment of other axes of oppression that intersect with racism
- Increased number of workplace complaints

This guidance document is supported by real examples of racially traumatic incidents from our colleagues in London local government, which help to bring the issue to life and provide a deeper understanding of how racial trauma plays out in daily life. These examples can be read in the annex to this report, but we highly recommend that you seek examples from your own local authorities when undertaking exploratory work in this domain, using this guidance as a supporting document.

# Supporting Black and Asian Colleagues: What Can We Do to Help?

Organisations will have policies and procedures in place to ensure that the employment relationship can be managed fairly and equitably. However, we know that despite this, the experience of how these policies and processes are applied can still have a detrimental impact on Black, Asian and Multi-Ethnic staff. Colleagues may feel that the culture of the organisation does not allow for open and honest discussions regarding the experiences of staff that impact their day-to-day lives.

## Points of consideration include:

**Organisational Culture** – A culturally competent organisation is crucial. As organisations and public institutions, we must be proactive in building our understanding of different cultures and their experiences, this will help build openness, trust and confidence across the organisation and establish an environment where Black, Asian and Multi-Ethnic colleagues can share narratives and, as an organisation, have an honest discussion around experiences and challenges. This should be facilitated by senior leadership.

**Role of HR and OD Leaders** – As senior leaders who are central to shaping and improving organisational culture, HR and OD Leaders are essential in embedding a positive and inclusive working environment. Their role is to establish and help foster an organisation where Black, Asian and Multi-Ethnic colleagues can share narratives and, as an organisation, have an open and honest discussion around experiences and challenges. Equally, they should be open to challenging the organisation and senior leaders where practices and processes are not fit for purpose or can be improved.

It is advisable to provide anti-racist and cultural competency training for senior members of staff to foster an inclusive environment where everyone can feel psychologically safe and thrive in their authenticity and progress in their careers.

**Emotional Emancipation Circles** – These are support groups (often self-help) in which Black, Asian and Multi-Ethnic colleagues work together to overcome, heal from and tackle trauma caused by structural racism. It is a model centred around; storytelling, resilience building and empowerment.

**Employee Assistance Programme (EAP)** – EAPs are designed to help employees deal with problems that adversely affect their work performance, and overall health and well-being. They are often short-term models which include assessments, counselling and referral services. *It is advisable to determine which therapists are culturally competent and/or have lived experiences.*

**Well-Being Champions and EDI Champions** – The role of an EDI champion is to actively promote awareness of EDI issues, including racial trauma, and to enhance and embed EDI practices across organisations. Wellbeing champions can provide peer-based well-being support and signpost employees to well-being resources. Further to this, they can promote and identify well-being issues in need of organisational attention.

**Staff networks** – Prevalent and supported staff networks can drive, recommend and deliver change in organisations concerning racial trauma. If staff networks are successful, they should be intersectional, facilitating regular engagement with members and dialogue with senior staff.

**Understanding the workforce** – By analysing data concerning recruitment, staff surveys, exit interviews, and reviewing formal complaints raised by staff, we can begin to understand the core issues impacting staff and address matters that can be complex and multi-layered.

If you have feedback or suggestions on how we can improve the practices that support Black, Asian and Multi-Ethnic colleagues in the context of racial trauma, please contact [Julie Foy](#) and [Musrat Zaman](#) – the chairs of the Tackling Racial Inequality Programme's Large Employers working group.

# Annex: Racially Traumatic Stories

## Case Study 1 - Anonymous: “Only white children are allowed to play this game”

My very first memory of school is being in a playground, and another child saying to me “only white children are allowed to play this game”. Growing up in a majority white community, I often experienced exclusion and othering, leaving me with a strong fear of rejection. This manifests itself in a work setting in all sorts of ways. Although I’m an extrovert and gain energy from my friends, I can’t think of anything worse than having to go to a conference and network with people – I’m hyper aware that people look at me and might be judging me because of my colour. I am reluctant to strike up conversations with strangers, in case they’re outright racists, or they come out with something about immigrants, or ask intrusive questions like: “Where are you from originally?” I recently spoke to a friend who, like me, has a Muslim-sounding name. We compared experiences of having our CVs rejected by companies who didn’t want anyone with “a brown name” in case we turned up in a headscarf. If I didn’t drink alcohol, I don’t think I would have had some of the opportunities that I’ve had, particularly within the private sector. I’ve had to jettison most of my cultural identity in order to fit in and be successful in a work context.

## Case Study 2 - Phoenicia Oyeniyi: “I bet your real name is not even...”

1. In 2012/13, a consultant was planning to attend an event in the borough. We were sitting in an open plan area with several colleagues and he turned to me to ask about the best mode of transport. I recall feeling confused as to why he automatically assumed I would know about local transport. I responded I was unsure as I am not familiar with the local area. He made the comment: “Funnily, I assumed you lived locally”. I stayed silent. I knew where the assumption was coming from.

2. In 2006/07, after rounding up at a pupil achievement awards event, an education consultant asked me in the presence of several officers which Lambeth school I attended. I responded I did not grow up in Lambeth. She looked surprised and said: “Oh, I assumed you would have attended school in Lambeth”. To which I responded: “To be clear, I left school many years ago and I am not, and have never been, a Lambeth resident - why would I have been schooled here?” The consultant looked embarrassed and quickly changed the subject. Again, I knew where the assumption was coming from.

3. Two decades ago (2000/01), I worked as a P/T clerical assistant which supported me through college and university. An investigation was being carried out on a number of West African employees who were using fake names and addresses to gain employment. I was seated in the office and the CEO spoke about the issue with another senior colleague, suddenly he stopped, looked over at me, smirked and said: “I bet your real name is not even Phoenicia Douglas” (my maiden name). I was horrified, ashamed and embarrassed that he had tarnished me with the same brush because I happened to be of the same race as the employees undergoing a fraud investigation. The other senior manager looked embarrassed but said nothing. As they left the office, I burst into tears.

From then onwards I avoided being in the same room as the CEO, whenever he walked into a room, I walked out. My confidence was greatly knocked and as a young adult I came to the horrible realisation that because of my race, the worst would almost certainly be assumed of me. I did not request any support. I did not believe any good could come out of me reporting the incident to HR, seeing as they reported to the CEO.

## Case Study 3 - Anonymous: “Chip on your shoulder”

1. At a social event I was asked what I did for a living by a white gentleman. At the time I worked for a well-known high street bank. I merely said that I worked for a bank, not naming the bank. He replied and asked if it was the Bank of India that I worked for, I can only assume he reached that conclusion because as I am Asian.

2. In another workplace where I talked openly about how I practiced my faith, this was replayed back to me by a manager that I had a chip on my shoulder.

3. I often get asked where I am from, I was born and raised in the UK. People assume I am a foreigner.

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