

# DISMANTLING INSTITUTIONAL RACISM IN AOTEAROA

**A synthesis of views shared at roundtable discussions held in August 2019**

## Introduction

1. Between March and May 2019 the New Zealand Baha'i Community held a series of Hui for young people to express their views on improving race relations in Aotearoa. Institutional racism was one of the key themes arising from their kōrero – the resulting Youth Statement declares that "Institutional racism exists, and it must be dismantled".
2. Two roundtable discussions were held in August 2019 to further explore the issue of institutional racism and how it might be dismantled. These discussions were attended by a relatively small but influential group of New Zealanders, including Members of Parliament, government officials, business leaders, members of the media, academics and civil society leaders. The discussions were somewhat brief but frank, open and constructive.
3. Below is a summary and synthesis of the ideas shared during the roundtable discussions. It is set out in two parts:
  - i. The first section explores the patterns and social structures that make up institutional racism.
  - ii. The second section presents reflections on the ways and means of dismantling institutional racism at the organisational level.
4. The document has been prepared by the Baha'i Community's Office of Public Affairs. However, it cannot be taken as representing the definite views of the Baha'i Community, or indeed any of the individuals who participated in the discussions. It is an attempt to present a collection of diverse views as a coherent whole, for the purpose of advancing thought about institutional racism in Aotearoa.

## Patterns and structures of institutional racism

5. The Youth Statement 'Confronting racism with justice and unity' describes institutional racism as social structures that reflect and reproduce racial prejudice and inequity at a societal level. Below is a description of some of the forms institutional racism can take, based on the views shared at the roundtable discussions. It is not exhaustive. Rather, it highlights some of the relations and links between the different manifestations of racism in society.

## Outcomes and experiences

6. At the level of measurable social outcomes, institutional racism is reflected in disparities of income, health, education between different ethnic groups. At the level of the lived experience of underprivileged populations, it can take the form of being 'churned' or processed through different institutions in a series of negative and alienating experiences – from school, to the workplace, to the justice system and social services.

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7. The power to change the outcomes and lived experiences of institutional racism is distributed across many individual institutions, including not only government but the private sector, the media, the education sector and non-governmental organisations. At the same time, these individual organisations are subject to varying degrees of institutional racism.

## The organisational level

8. Institutional racism can take a wide range of forms at the organisational level. Lack of representation is a common theme, because powerful institutions are often populated by people with some degree of privilege. Even if an organisation has many Māori and migrant employees or members, the distribution of these people across its hierarchy may be quite inequitable.
9. Tokenism is another common theme in experiences of institutional racism within organisations. For example, a media outlet might be enthusiastic to hire an Asian presenter, but uncomfortable with the prospect of a presenter speaking English in an 'Asian' accent. Despite an overt commitment to 'diversity', editorial and production decisions may prioritise retaining Pākehā audiences over non-Pākehā audiences.
10. Similarly, some institutions appear to treat their clients, stakeholders or customers differently based on race. For example, frontline staff may make judgements about the risk posed by people or situations based on the race or ethnicity of those involved. As another example, people may experience an institution as more or less inviting or hostile depending on the fit between their cultural background and language and those prevalent in the institution. Finally, some organisations working with under-privileged populations may display a 'white saviour' attitude and make ill-informed assumptions about the people they serve.
11. An institution's internal policies can reflect and reproduce racism in a range of ways. An obvious example is how an organisation deals with racial prejudice among its members or employees. If an incident is dealt with effectively, it remains an individual isolated example of racial prejudice. If not, it can form part of an ongoing pattern of enabling and accommodating racist behaviour. Hiring practices are another a problematic area (see paragraph 15 below).

## Constitutional transformation

12. The question of constitutional transformation also needs to be considered part of the conversation about institutional racism. Te Tiriti o Waitangi is the formal legal basis for the exercise of governance in Aotearoa. However, our current political institutions were set up under colonialism and are based on an Anglo-American model of partisan representative democracy. It is by no means clear that these constitutional arrangements are consistent with the explicit meaning or principles of the te reo Māori version of Te Tiriti, which is the version with validity under international law.
13. In this context, constitutional change based on Te Tiriti may be a powerful means of addressing the institutional racism faced by Māori over the past 150 years. Such change may also benefit other people of colour. For example, we are seeing growing solidarity and collaboration between ethnic minorities and tangata whenua in some parts of Aotearoa, recognising their common interest in racial equity and inclusivity.

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## Pathways to dismantling institutional racism

14. Many of the reflections on the ways to dismantle institutional racism came from participants' experiences in their workplaces. However, these reflections seem generally valuable, because:
  - i. There are similarities in how different kinds of institutions change and resist change – for example institutional change seems to generally involve negotiating power structures and finding like-minded peers to collaborate with.
  - ii. Decisions, policies and practices made within institutions in turn shape the broader structures in society that reinforce and reproduce racial prejudice, such as inequalities in the distribution of income, health and educational outcomes along ethnic lines.

## Acknowledging and measuring institutional racism

15. One of the key steps towards dismantling institutional racism is to acknowledge that it exists. For example, decisions about hiring, allocation of work and promotion are commonly viewed as merit-based and therefore inherently fair. This fails to account for affinity bias – we are more likely to respond positively to people who look like us and sound like us. It also fails to account for other forms of unconscious bias that we may carry as a result of our experience or exposure to media, and for covert but intentional racism and bigotry. Blind screening of CVs can only partially address these issues, because most personnel decisions are impossible to make without knowing an individual personally. By acknowledging the likely impact of affinity bias and other biases on personnel decisions, organisations can start addressing them as underlying causes of under-representation of ethnic minorities in positions of power.
16. It may be useful to have internal tests and measures for institutional racism. One organisation established measures for representation, hiring practices, institutional practices, service delivery, and outcomes for clients. Such measures can help establish widespread acceptance of the existence of institutional racism within an organisation, and of the need for change. They may also be useful for tracking progress over time, and for holding leaders accountable.

## Data, objectivity and efficiency

17. Publicly available data can also be useful for dismantling institutional racism. Statistics on ethnic disparities in income, health and educational outcomes are essential evidence of institutional racism. Reporting on representation of ethnic minorities in leadership and on ethnic pay gaps helps maintain pressure for change in the public sector. The lack of recording and reporting of racist incidents limits accountability, both in terms of individual incidents and addressing broader patterns of racist behaviour.
18. At the same time, we may need to resist the idea that comprehensive data is always necessary for a problem to be considered real and worth addressing. Treating quantitative data as a prerequisite for change may in itself be a subtle form of institutional racism. This raises further questions. Can we treat the stories of those who suffer racism as compelling qualitative data in itself? How do we negotiate existing power structures that often privilege 'objective' statistical evidence without adopting that perspective ourselves?
19. Similarly, the dominance of 'efficiency' as an organisational value may be a barrier to achieving equity and addressing racism. How do we establish equity, empathy and inclusivity as core values in environments where the logic underpinning most decisions seems to be efficient use of scarce resources?

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## The role of leaders

20. These questions point to the role that leaders have to play in dismantling institutional racism. Leaders shape the authorising environment within each organisation – they have the power to keep asking for more and more data, or to authorise an initiative based on its alignment with their vision for the organisation. Where leaders have not initially been supportive or responsive, it may be useful to frame the need for change in terms of existing organisational objectives, strategies or values. Even reluctant or partial support from leadership can help legitimise and protect efforts to address institutional racism.
21. Leaders of all ethnic backgrounds can drive progress, especially if they listen to staff members who experience racism. Leaders need to actively learn how to have conversations about race and culture. It is the responsibility of those who appoint leaders – boards of trustees, boards of directors, government ministers – to ensure that leaders receive appropriate support and training in this respect.

## Conceptual frameworks

22. Many organisations are taking some action to address under-representation and exclusion of ethnic minorities. Such efforts are usually labelled and understood using the general category of ‘diversity and inclusion’. This framing may limit their efficacy in addressing institutional racism.
23. Organisations that have explicitly acknowledged institutional racism as an issue seem to benefit from doing so (see paragraph 15 above). Conversely, efforts focused solely on ‘diversity’ may not:
  - i. challenge the norm of whiteness that persists in many powerful institutions,
  - ii. adequately address the influence of colonisation and other power imbalances that are rooted in history, or
  - iii. recognise the special importance of empowering Māori as Treaty partners and as tangata whenua.
24. There is also interest in using the concept of manaakitanga as an alternative to ‘diversity and inclusion’. This framing centres a Māori worldview and positions Māori practices and whakaaro as the tools for welcoming and caring for the diverse people who make up an organisation.

## The requirements of lasting change

25. Whatever conceptual framework is used to frame such efforts, it is important to recognise that programmes of organisational change do not immediately or completely address structures of institutional racism. Profound and lasting change in the culture and functioning of an organisation seems to depend on multiple factors, including
  - i. acceptance and commitment from leaders,
  - ii. the governance and accountability framework for change,
  - iii. a clear strategy, and
  - iv. personnel with the capability to lead change.
26. Even with these measures in place, the influence of racism may be slow to leave an organisation’s culture, its policies and practices, and the hearts and minds of employees or members. In some cases, an organisation may seem to actively resist change, testing the resolve and endurance of those working for progress.

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## Emotional labour and allies

27. For many people of colour, working in an organisation subject to institutional racism can be emotionally exhausting, even without the added pressure of leading initiatives to address racism. When people of colour do lead such initiatives, they may be discouraged, questioned or even abused by their colleagues and superiors.
28. The emotional labour involved in dismantling institutional racism underlines the importance of building networks of likeminded people supporting one another to work towards institutional change. These networks can be formed within and across organisations, formally or informally.
29. The fact that this emotional labour often falls most heavily on people of colour highlights the role that Pākehā can play in supporting their colleagues and sustaining efforts at institutional change. Aside from contributing directly to such initiatives, Pākehā can work to understand and overcome their own biases, educate their peers and actively question racist behaviours and policies.

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