

RACISM THROUGH EXCLUSION

70% of employees involved in a recent study¹ reported feeling excluded at work in the last six months. Given that our need to fit in is such a fundamental human instinct, this finding has significant implications.

Just as feeling included has positive impact on areas such as well-being, engagement and motivation, feeling excluded, can be extremely damaging. Recent research for example has found that not only does exclusion at work have a detrimental impact on commitment, engagement and turnover, but that those who feel excluded are more likely to report health problems. Moreover, these effects are even more detrimental than those of harassment.

The ironic thing about inclusion of course is that some employees are significantly more likely to be included than others.

Even from the age of two, children begin to show preferences for children and people like themselves. These preferences develop over time, so that children quickly hold value-laden attitudes and beliefs that differentiate between their own group and other groups. By age three, children show more positivity towards—and report more reciprocated friendships with—same-sex peers [2] and by four-five years white children prefer—and express a greater liking for—other white children [3]. Children are not colour blind in the way that we cosily like to assume they are. Worse still, as clearly demonstrated in Binna's book on Racism at Work, it is the way we socialise children that fuels them to travel from a benign state of recognising race differences to developing value laden inferences and onto discriminatory attitudes and behaviours.

The trouble is of course that we are ultimately lazy. We find it much easier to include some people than we do others – indeed we often include people who are like us without ever being consciously aware that we are doing so. We find it easier to communicate with people that we are similar to; we are better able to predict their behaviour, so we feel more comfortable around them. We have higher levels of trust initially for people we are demographically similar to, and stronger relationships. Because this is so much easier with people that we are demographically similar to, that means that all too easily, both at work and socially, we stick to people like us.

This means that some groups of people are much more likely to feel excluded than others, because they are in the minority. Put simply, those who are in the majority are more likely to experience inclusion simply because they have to work less hard, travel less far, meet fewer people, to find others who are like them. Those who are in the minority, including ethnic minority groups, do not have that day-to-day luxury. They are more likely to feel excluded.

At work this plays out in critical areas. We are, for example, more likely to share secrets with someone of the same race as our own⁴. Ethnic minority employees have less access to confidential

¹ O'Reilly, J. et al. (2014). Is Negative Attention Better Than No Attention? The Comparative Effects of Ostracism and Harassment at Work. *Organization Science*, 26 (3), pp. 774 – 793, permalink: <https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.2014.0900>

² K. M. Zosuls, C. L. Martin, D. N. Ruble et al., (2011). 'It's not that we hate you': understanding children's gender attitudes and expectancies about peer relationships," *British Journal of Developmental Psychology*, vol. 29, no. 2, pp. 288–304, 2011.

³ V. Lam, S. Guerrero, N. Damree, and I. Enesco, (2011). "Young children's racial awareness and affect and their perceptions about mothers' racial affect in a multiracial context," *British Journal of Developmental Psychology*, vol. 29, no. 4, pp. 842–864, 2011.

⁴ Louch, H. (2000). Personal network integration: transitivity and homophily in strong-tie relations. *Social Networks*, 22, pp.45 – 64.

information, and, not unconnected to this point, are three times more likely than white people to have to apply for an upcoming roles using formal procedures rather than on a who-you-know basis.

Similarly, ethnic minority employees are also significantly less likely to have access to mentors at all, let alone senior mentors, again because those connections through the in-crowd. Ethnic minority employees are also significantly less likely than their white counterparts to be sought for work-related advice⁵.

Racism through exclusion is not an unfortunate inevitability that we can shrug our shoulders about in mock desperation. There are things that can be done. Creating an environment, for example, where people feel that it is safe to speak up and challenge at work goes hand-in-hand with feeling included. Ethnic minority people are less likely to experience this sense of psychological safety at work. That can be fixed simply by inviting, encouraging and building on opinions rather than dismissing or riding roughshod over them. Chapter 12 in Binna's book *Racism at Work* outlines 5 clear rules for Leaders, 5 clear rules for HR, 5 clear rules for L&D specialists and more. The research has been done. The knowledge is there. If only we can be bothered. Our laziness and desire to spend our time in our comfort zone is all that stands in our way.

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⁵ Klein, K.J. *et al* (2004). How do they get there? An examination of the antecedents of centrality in team networks. *Academy of Management Journal*, 47 (6), 952–963.