

Features

Forget race, we have prejudices you haven't dreamt of

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Roland White attended a diversity training class that revealed how fed up we are becoming with enforced cultural sensitivity.

In our modern multiracial world, it is no picnic being called Mr White. People do tend to make such assumptions. Which is why I am sitting in a rather dreary hotel in the Midlands, staring at a flip chart and waiting to receive my very first dose of diversity training.

The first thing you notice is that we're not particularly diverse. My classmates all work for an NHS team that looks after drug addicts. There are 14 white people, and just one black woman. Our instructor is also a white male, Laurence Harvey.

He is certainly not the stereotypical diversity trainer. A former salesman and drummer in a small-time rock band, he became interested in the world of equality and diversity while working as a police constable in Northampton. But while he might be an unusual teacher, I suspect that we are a very typical class. All of us have been sent here by our employers, and very few of us look grateful.

"What do you expect from today's course?" asks Harvey brightly. "Why did you come here?"

"Because we've been told we have to," says one woman with brutal honesty. A male colleague is even more frank. He is bald and stocky, and looks -by his own description like a thug. "I've been on lots of these before," he says, tucking a pencil behind his ear, "and I'm interested to see which racial group is fashionably more equal these days."

Later in the morning we will be asked to tick off our own prejudices from a list of 36 possible targets. These include men with ginger hair, women with tattoos, Germans on holiday and caravan drivers. If you are a ginger-haired German on a caravanning holiday this might be an uncomfortable moment. But there is something missing. Because I'd bet that right at the top of many people's list of dislikes is diversity training itself.

We are all supposed to be embracing diversity, but the evidence suggests we're not embracing it all that warmly. According to the Migrationwatch pressure group, around 726,000 immigrants arrived in London in the 10 years up to 2005. In response, 606,000 Londoners seem to have packed up and moved to other parts of the country. We have an example right here on our course. She is a secretary who arrived in the Midlands three years ago from north London. "I was beginning to feel that I was the foreigner," she says.

"I couldn't actually say that I was proud to be English because that wasn't acceptable." Some people go even further. According to figures released last week, nearly 200,000 Britons emigrated last year.

The Orwellian attitude adopted by parts of the race relations industry has not helped. When Oona King wanted to adopt a child, a social worker queried her application form. The former Labour MP had described herself as "mixed race". The white social worker, after taking advice from a black colleague, insisted the correct term was now "dual heritage".

Just last week two workers on the London Underground were hauled before a court - and quickly cleared -over an incident involving a bag of black jelly babies.

Station manager Victor Cooney told the court: "One time I gave him a bag of jelly babies and he called me a racist because there were too many black ones in the bag."

It was also reported last week that Kirklees council in West Yorkshire has just reversed a long-term equality policy that -among other things -banned the phrase "political correctness". Council leader Robert Light explained: "Nowadays we all live in a diverse community and we realise that this sort of simplistic approach belittles the concept of equality."

It's a change that is long overdue, especially in the world of diversity training.

Under the old-fashioned approach, people -usually white people -were often forced to role play so that they could explore the depths of their supposed bigotry. "On a previous course I was asked how I wanted my coffee," says my stocky male classmate. "When I said black I was told that was not acceptable and I should have asked for coffee without milk." On another course he listened resentfully as a black tutor explained how white people could never truly understand discrimination.

Perhaps the most controversial diversity specialist is an American called Jane Elliott, who divides her classes into "blue-eyed" and "brown-eyed". The brown eyed classmates then get to mock their blue-eyed workmates. According to Elliott, this gives them a feeling of what it is like to be black. Elliott, by the way, is white.

Critics of this approach say it creates bitterness and resentment. They also insist that it doesn't work. In a report published in September, Harvard professor Frank Dobbin said diversity training simply wasn't worth the money. "For the past 40 years companies have tried to increase diversity, spending millions of dollars without actually stopping to determine whether or not their efforts have been worth it. Certainly in the case of diversity training the answer is no."

Yet it's still big business. It was recently reported that Scotland Yard alone had spent Pounds 450m on equality and diversity in the past three years. And in that time, race discrimination claims have risen by 24%.

Harvey and his company, Actuate Learning and Development, have a completely different approach. In fact he hardly mentions race at all. Don't look at people as members of any racial group, he advises, but approach them as individuals.

"Previous courses have told people about taking their shoes off when visiting a Muslim's house," he says. "The trouble is, not all Muslims will ask you to take off your shoes. On the other hand, I might ask you to remove your shoes if I have a new carpet put in. It's just a question of common sense."

In this new world of diversity training, prejudice is accepted as part of human nature. "We all have dislikes," Harvey tells us. "It's only human. You can think what you like. It's what you do that makes the difference." So embrace your prejudice, but manage it.

During our day-long session it becomes clear that we even have assumptions about diversity trainers. "I thought you'd be from an ethnic minority," says one classmate. "I thought you'd be boring," says another, "because diversity is tooth-pullingly dull." Anything else? "Yes," says one of the women. "You remind me of Michael Barrymore."

We learn to confront trouble early; we learn that employers are entitled to sack difficult staff as long as they can prove they have tried to accommodate them, and we compile a list of the differences between people - from gender, hair colour and height to taste in music and dress sense. All of these differences, we are told, could make trouble in the workplace. "I predict that in a few years we will see a size discrimination law," says Harvey.

As our course progresses, it becomes clear just how much we are struggling to get to grips with our modern mix of cultures and races. My black classmate tells me that some of her patients still refuse to be treated by a black woman in what is a predominantly white area. Other patients don't want her visiting them at home.

This is not because they object to her colour, but because her colour makes her well known in the area -and patients don't want the neighbours to know they have a drug problem. "Nothing will change," she says gloomily after the course.

Yet her white colleagues are increasingly bitter and resentful. They say things out loud that they would once have kept to themselves. A former prison officer complains about Asian prisoners. "Compared with the blacks and the whites, a lot of them were totally rude, arrogant and would not do what they were told." He then complains that his children were made to attend religious education lessons about Islam, but Muslims were allowed to bunk off when lessons turned to Christianity.

However, later on he corrects us on matters of Islam, having attended a course on the subject. People's attitudes are never as simple as they seem.

His stocky colleague complains: "I remember going for jobs when I was clearly the best candidate, yet I knew I had absolutely no chance of getting the job because I was a white male." He says he's enjoyed the course, but describes his previous experience of diversity training as "jargon and s****".

The old methods took no account of the complexity of human relations. Even racial discrimination is not as simple as diversity tutors would have us believe. The Nigerian actor David Oyelowo once told me he'd never suffered abuse from white people, but was bullied by the West Indians at his London school.

The new approach to diversity doesn't leave everybody so bitter afterwards: most people seem to enjoy themselves. But can it repair the damage of the past?

During an open discussion I wanted to ask my black classmate: did she think white male heterosexuals were being discriminated against? In the end, good manners got the better of me. I didn't want to draw attention to the fact that she was the only black person in the class. What an irony: on a diversity training course, I treated this woman differently because of her colour.

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