TRANSFORMATION

Looking racism in the eye: three lenses

As James Baldwin once said, “I can’t believe what you say because I see what you do.”

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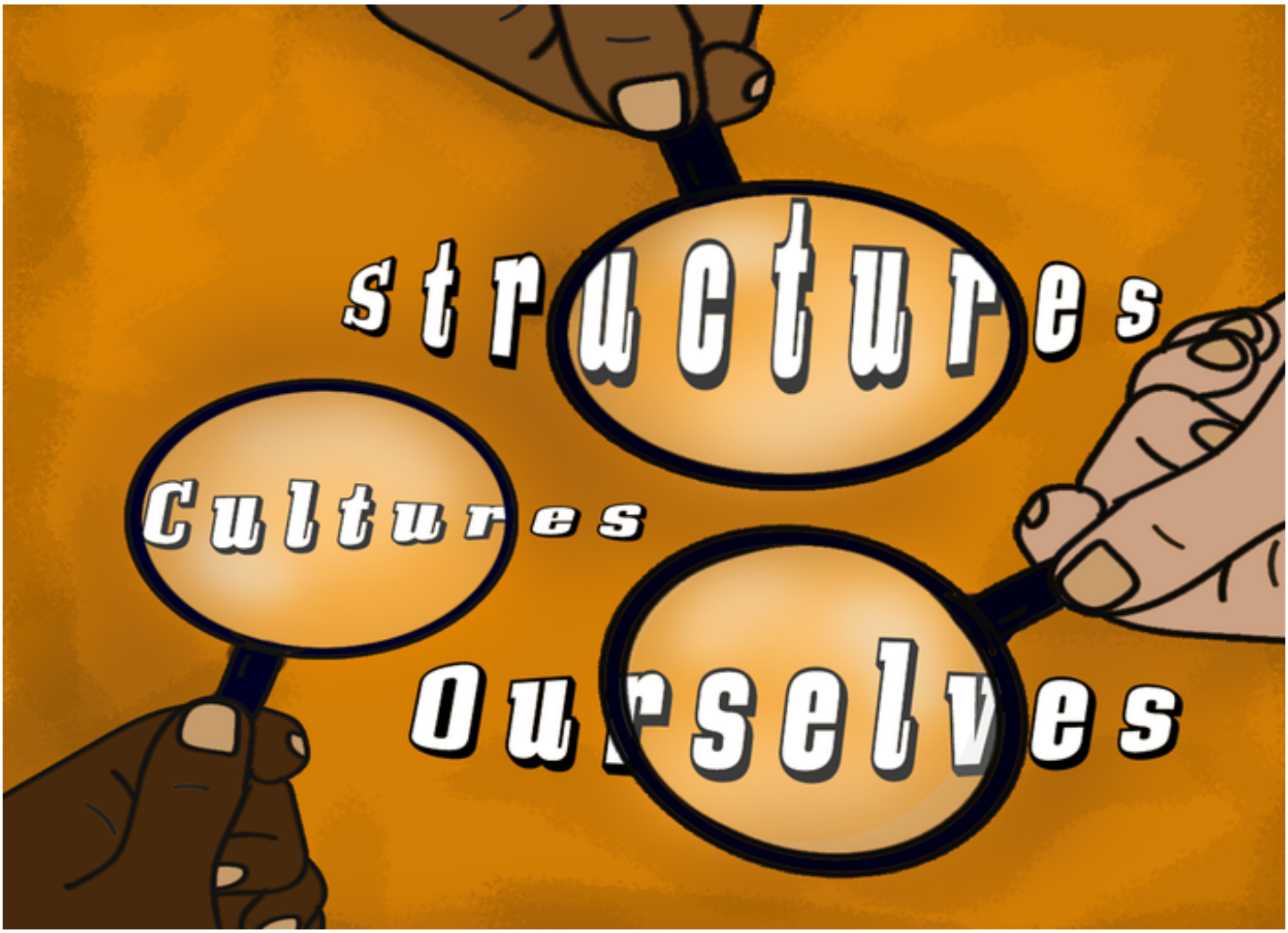

Since the Black Lives Matter movement erupted I've been flooded by white friends asking me what I think about whiteness and my lived experience of structural racism. It's been exhausting. For years, I've been screaming into the void about the impact of racism on the lives of Black and non-Black people of colour, only to be met with incredulity that I'm 'still banging on about race,' or the outright refusal to acknowledge that there's any such thing as white privilege.

Now, at last, it feels as though the 'performance' of anti-racism might just morph into something transformative. The problem is that for many people I've spoken to, the magnitude of racism is overwhelming, and paralysing. How can we, as individuals and organisations, really make a difference?

Based on my experience, I think there are three lenses which can illuminate and structure a real and coherent anti-racism: structures, cultures and ourselves. I call

this the ‘triple lens of racial equity,’ choosing ‘equity’ over ‘equality’ because we can’t treat everyone in the conversation the same when they start from different positions in society. We have to work harder to reach those who are disproportionately excluded.

Structures.

A former colleague of mine now works at a large charity which has recently decided to ‘become anti-racist’ in the wake of the murder of George Floyd. Their ‘Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Lead’ asked the CEO to put out a statement acknowledging that the sector at large suffered from racial disparities, and that there was much work to do. The CEO said he believed the statement would set the process off ‘on the wrong foot.’ He went on to explain that he had never witnessed or experienced racism. He is a middle-aged, middle-class white man.

This is a classic example of the ‘we don’t have a problem’ mindset, and shows why the first lens, examining structures, is so important. Just because you have a certain percentage of Black and non-Black people of colour in your organisation doesn’t mean that it’s representative. Evidence shows that "snowy peak" syndrome continues to prevail: you may have high levels of racial diversity at lower levels of the hierarchy, but how about in middle management and senior leadership? These are the kinds of gaps that a structure lens helps you to see.

There are also huge variations between racial and ethnic minorities, including the intersections of racial and ethnic identities with gender, religion, sexuality and disability. That’s why categories like “BAME” in the UK (‘Black, Asian and minority ethnic’) are only helpful as a ‘first look’ - we need to delve much deeper. For example, a recent study revealed that the pay gap between white and Black and non-Black people of colour in the UK higher education sector is 9%, but it is 14% between Black and white academic staff. Add in gender and the gap is even wider. A more granular, targeted approach gives us vital information on where we need to do better.

Cultures.

A year ago, frustrated by a shoddily-designed local music event, my partner publicly criticized the organisers of a diversity panel in a Facebook post. It went semi-viral in our networks because it resonated with many Black and non-Black artists of colour's experiences of being invited to arts and literary festivals to speak only about racial identities, in contrast to white artists who are free to share anything and everything about their creative practice.

When she called out the event, the reaction from the organisers was one of intense defensiveness: a consummate performance of white fragility. Despite Arts Council England's recent commitment to increasing diversity in the arts, in 'unconscious' programming decisions like these we can see that the culture of the arts sector is still one that assumes whiteness as the default, and where Black and non-Black artists of colour are valued differently to their white counterparts.

The culture lens focusses attention on the language, practices and processes that maintain the reproductive power of whiteness. Whiteness is little understood, and reluctantly spoken about. In my experience, organisations often flinch when the term 'white' is used, as though simply naming it is an act of hostility. There's a revealing analogy with gender here: we can't tackle sexism unless we name and call out patriarchy, because it is patriarchy which sustains gender inequity.

Similarly, whiteness sustains racial inequity because it is a set of ideas and practices about race which have been circulated, sedimented and encoded through organisational cultures. It operates by invisibly reproducing a white perspective to the exclusion of all others. By not naming it, we allow it to fester in the darkness.

Whiteness operates everywhere. It's present in university curricula, where knowledge from the global South is marginalized relative to that from Europe and North America. It operates in publishing, where marketing departments target their publicity campaigns almost exclusively to a single reader profile: a white middle-class woman often referred to as "Susan."

Colour-blindness is often offered as a solution to whiteness, but this assumes that it's possible to start from a 'neutral' position, even when behaviours and actions are intuitively angled towards white perspectives. Treating everybody the same erases

the ways in which the historical accrual of white privilege and racial discrimination have mutually reinforced one another for centuries.

That's why terms such as 'inclusion' and 'tolerance' are often favoured in anti-racist strategies: they sound better to the ears of white people. Agency still rests with white people because they get to 'include and tolerate,' while the rest of us have to wait patiently to *be* included and tolerated.

Ourselves.

Two years ago, I was asked to run a workshop on anti-racism for a social enterprise. I was taken aback, because I knew very little about the sector they were working in (housing). The organization had a high proportion of women on its staff. Although I was flattered to be asked, I decided to decline the offer, recommending a female colleague of colour instead.

The question of who gets to 'do' anti-racism is fraught, and so the third lens - ourselves - enables an exploration of both the resources at our disposal *and* our own privilege and blind spots. Doing this may require us to cede space to others in some contexts, and in others, to relieve the burden of anti-racism from the shoulders of colleagues and peers who identify as Black and non-Black people of colour. While we should always value lived experience as one way of identifying inequity in structures and cultures, none of us are able to apprehend racial inequity from a single standpoint.

Above all, our approaches need to empower *everyone* to be agents of racial equity. For too long, the burden of anti-racism has fallen on the shoulders of people of colour. We have been left to fix the systems which limit us. The emotional and psychological toll of this labour is seldom recognised, and neither is the exhaustion of beating an anti-racist drum which others don't want to hear. To paraphrase Sara Ahmed 'when you pose the problem, you become the problem.' It's up to all of us to pose the problem, and all of us to solve it together.

It's easy to slip into a despondent hand-wringing about structural and institutional racism. The magnitude of racial inequities can be paralysing, and we're left asking how we can possibly make a difference. The triple lens I've described is designed to

liberate us from this paralysis. As we examine our culture and ourselves, we can ‘see’ racism with greater clarity, and when we confront it, it becomes easier to join the dots between discriminatory outcomes, culture, and personal biases. Tiny sparks of change, informing one another, will generate momentum and the will to drive bigger changes.

What we do in our workplaces - whether they are universities, charities, businesses or the arts and creative industries - can have a material effect on raising racial equity at large. Organisations which adopt explicitly anti-racist identities where racial equity is not a decorative flourish but a key performance indicator will also do better.

But please: don’t call yourselves anti-racist until that is the authentic reality, one that is supported by all the evidence and the data and the judgments of Black and non-Black people of colour in your organisation. Be open to the fact that you’re aspiring to anti-racism while acknowledging you’re not there yet. In the words of James Baldwin: “I can’t believe what you say because I see what you do.”

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