

As a Person of Colour and a Minority in Britain, is it safe to Speak Up?

A recent tweet by Nadine White[1] who writes for the Independent set me thinking. People of colour (POC), she wrote, had to be always careful about how they were perceived. This comment was related to the sacking of Kwasi Kwarteng as Chancellor of the Exchequer.[2] Even if POC were successful they had to temper their talk and actions because they would be judged by a different set of standards.

I reflected back on similar thoughts that have crossed my mind over the last many years. As an immigrant to the UK over 30 years ago, it did not really strike me initially that I was of a different colour, because I wasn't much aware of the concept of discrimination. Till then, if at any time, I didn't do as well in my career aspirations, examinations or in job interviews, as someone else, it was obviously because they were simply 'just better' than me. Thoughts of favouritism and discrimination, did not cross my mind.

Slowly over the years, I came to realise that there were double standards and when I have seen my white colleagues act or behave somewhat 'inappropriately' the usual lines quoted (by those in positions of authority) in defending by trivialising their misdemeanours as, 'they did not mean anything bad'. For me, I had to be careful and if I said something even slightly aggressively I was put into a corner and made to feel that I had done something grossly wrong.

I reflected on the impact of a recent interaction with some officials in positions of authority, even before I saw this tweet. I feel that when white people speak to brown or black people they can easily be more aggressive (sometimes labelled as "confidence") and get away with it. This is because deep within them there is a feeling of superiority that comes across, especially in a one to one conversation where it's one person's word against other. It is perhaps time to acknowledge that many minority ethnic staff do not feel they are operating in a 'level playing field'. [3] There is evidence that people from a minority background are progressing in nearly every walk of life. This is down to hard work, drive and a determination to succeed, a clear trait among many minority communities. But there are still some blockages and 'snowy white peaks' at the very top of business and in our public institutions.[4] I have noticed that successful brown and black individuals are extremely careful about how they speak up in society, especially for the under-privileged. In fact, they rarely do. They're usually the type of people who have crept their way to the top, often by remaining highly individualistic, focusing on their work, being non-controversial, and of course, extremely good at what they do.

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Following the tweet by Nadine White it dawned on me that perhaps they may have a point. I suppose this reflects a choice between self-respect and success, where defining success is always a matter of personal opinion, while self-respect is exactly what it says on the tin. Having said this I do feel that it does not give licence to anyone to behave badly and that we must treat each other with respect and give everyone an element of privacy and private space to be allowed to say what they wish and make the occasional mistake. It is those who make repeated mistakes, behave inappropriately and cause offense or harm to their fellow humans, should and must be called out. Of course the price that one pays when one is a person of colour is a much higher price. In fact those who speak up will rarely be seen to be “successful” in the public domain unless they have started speaking up after they have obtained recognition.

A report by Baroness Casey into the harassment in the Met Police, showed that raising issues relating to racism, or other discrimination and wrongdoing often led to being labelled a trouble maker, which then led to unfair disciplinary action. There were reports that the misconduct system was not sufficiently robust with White officers who breach professional standards, but there was a lower threshold for minority ethnic officers and staff. [5]

Just to make sure that I wasn't getting completely the wrong end of the stick, I ran my perception of disparity in standards of behaviour, by leaders that I have great respect for. They agreed wholeheartedly that this tweet ‘nailed it’. It was entirely true that people of colour had to be more careful of how they came across. I have always paid a high personal price for speaking up. I don't really care much because the first thing anyone needs to do is live with oneself and if self-respect means upsetting bad people in the upper echelons, then that is just too bad. The successful ones will say its all a matter of perspective and only end-points matter. Baroness Casey's investigation found that, Black and Asian officers and staff were more likely than their White colleagues to have a misconduct allegation given a case to answer decision, and therefore have sanction justified, while there were no disparity in complaints received from the public. [5] Analysis of data from cases of

professional misconduct among medical professionals demonstrate clearly that minority ethnic doctors or nurses face a disproportionately higher risk of referral to the regulator and receiving harsher sanctions compared to their white peers. [6,7][8] They are frequently passed over for promotion and do not have equity of opportunity and the NHS Workforce Race Equality Standards reports do not show consistent improvement as there is a lack of accountability. [9]

No one is free of faults, of making errors of judgement, making unwise choices and certainly the adage, ‘to err is human...’ is true. Certainly in healthcare this is true regarding medical errors and their consequences, how staff interact with themselves - but effective organisations learn not by pointing fingers at caring health care professionals who make honest mistakes. The problem is not bad people- it is that good people working in unsupported and inadequate systems that need to be made safer. [10] To make this diatribe fair and balanced, we must put the boot on the other foot and have a really good look at ourselves.

We, as individuals whose first language is often not English may not understand the precise combination of words or nuances to express our thoughts fully and accurately. Language is more than a means of communication, it is linked to outcomes in trust, social capital and cultural identification or stereotyping. [11] For any individual, community or group, having assumptions about one's identity or have identities imposed upon can lead to inaccurate stereotyping, and undermining of self-worth. This understanding when it comes to diversity in culture and communication proves the need to better understand the language around it, especially considering its evolution through one's lives. [12] Many of us, ‘Easterners’, are used to wearing our hearts on our sleeve. It makes us more emotionally volatile, causing offence more easily, and therefore more vulnerable in a society ruled by the stiff, supercilious, and often disdainful upper lip. We often end up choosing the wrong words, or language that may be interpreted as harsh or even rude. Not just that but there are times when we are unable to use nuances which can easily soften the impact of our chosen words. Take this one step further, and our body language and

facial expression can also work to our detriment. This is perhaps different for those who are brought up with English as their first language, as they may be able to navigate social interactions with greater flexibility and with better social insight. The pitch and tone of our voice also makes a difference and higher pitch and a higher tone definitely causes more trouble.

The basic issue is deep-seated bias and discrimination on the basis of being different – albeit due to race, ethnicity, religion, gender, colour or any of the other protected characteristics that both define and divide as people in spite of having a common purpose. This is illustrated in the public discourse that surrounds the resignation of Rt Hon Liz Truss as UK's shortest tenure as Prime Minister. In response to such an exchange between a caller and talk radio host Sangita Myska (@SangitaMyska)[13] for the London Big Conversation Radio (@LBC) on why Tory voters would never vote for Rt Hon Rishi Sunak MP as a leader of the Conservative Party and future Prime Minister, because 'he is not even British' - Dr Ruby wrote on twitter;

I repeat, racism in UK is to the extent that white people will not vote in their best interest. They will choose whiteness over money, health and life. You absolutely should believe the assertion of this caller that many white people in UK think and vote like him. (@PaperWhispers)[14]

This exchange perhaps sums up the problem in UK society, one of identity that equates 'Whiteness' to 'Britishness', and therefore just goes on to confirm our worst suspicions. Can we, as a minority professional, as person of colour even have any hope to be treated with respect as an equal, and be considered a citizen of 'modern multicultural Britain'? For once, I feel despondent.

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