Pearn Kandola Research

Racism at Work in the UK (2021) Executive Summary

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Introduction

Background

In 2018, Pearn Kandola conducted a survey of 1,500 participants to explore the experience of racism in the modern UK workplace. This study found racism is "widespread, subtle and often ignored" (Racism at Work Survey Result, 2018). There were clear and significant distinctions between experiences of racism, observations of racism, and the likelihood of people recognising and intervening against racist acts between a wide array of racial groups. Moreover, the research revealed 60% of Black people, 42% of Asian people and 14% of White people have experienced racism in the workplace (Racism at Work Survey Result, 2018). Of those who had experienced racism in the workplace, 20% reported experiencing physical or verbal racial abuse. The survey also explored the ways people respond to witnessing racism. The most common response was to take no action.

Since 2018, the world has experienced turmoil and change: the outspread of the COVID-19 virus; the subsequent global lockdown and the abrupt transition to a world of working remotely; the tragic, extrajudicial killing of George Floyd; and the international revival of the widespread Black Lives Matter campaign.

In the UK, the Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities released a report into racial and ethnic disparities across various sectors in the UK, including 'Employment, Fairness at Work, and Enterprise'. The report, concluding "the UK 'no longer' has a system rigged against minorities" (BBC Politics News Article, 2021), led to outrage from some political figures and equality campaigners, as well as the resignation of Samuel Kasumu, the Prime Minister's senior adviser on ethnic minorities).

This research

This research replicates our 2018 study to determine whether there have been changes in perceptions and experiences of racism at work. Additionally, it gauges the action taken by organisations and the perceived impact this has by employees.

This Executive Summary presents an overview of our findings from UK respondents. A more report of our findings and recommendations is provided in the full version of the report.

A separate study was conducted with employees in the US. These findings are reported separately (see Racism at work US (2021).

Structure of this report

In the next section, we describe how we collected our data. In subsequent sections, we share our key findings, highlighting any differences between groups. Using our previous findings from 2018 as a benchmark, we also comment where there have been changes in knowledge and experience in the past three years.

Approach

Our sample

An online survey was administered via Prolific (an online research recruitment platform) and participants were paid for their time. To be eligible, participants had to be currently employed, identify as Asian, Black, or White, to live and work in the UK. The final sample consisted of **1,193 respondents** (507 White, 419 Asian, 267 Black).

What we measured

The survey was divided into five sections:

- **Section 1** asked for demographic questions about the respondents (sector of work, race, age, gender, and work environment).

- **Section 2** explored perceptions of racism, and presented scenarios to determine how effective individuals were at recognising different forms of racism.

- **Section 3** explored individual experiences of racism, as recipients and as observers.

- **Section 4** explored respondents' experience of stereotype threat.

- **Section 5** asked about the actions that organisations are taking to promote race equality in the workplace.

Analysis of results

The survey contained several 'yes'/'no' questions due to the distinct experiences of many areas explored (e.g., "Have you, in your own opinion, ever experienced racism in the workplace?"). Differences in frequencies between groups were analysed using Chi Square statistical tests and supplemented with odds ratio analyses.

The number of White, Black and Asian respondents in our 2021 sample differs to 2018. For this reason, direct comparisons between the overall 2021 and 2018 samples cannot be made. We know from previous findings that experiences vary between racial groups, therefore different proportions of Black and Asian respondents will influence overall sample results. Comparisons between 2018 and 2021 therefore focus on changes over time for each racial group.

Attitudes and perceptions

Do you think racism exists in the workplace?

A large proportion of respondents (**87.8%**) believe that racism exists in the workplace.

There has been little change in the proportion of Black respondents who said 'yes'. The proportion of **Asian respondents** who said 'yes' has **increased from 73.6% to 77.1%** since 2018, and the proportion of **White people** who said 'yes' has **increased from 61.9% to 66.5**%.

There were significant differences in the responses of different racial groups in 2021 (X^2 = (2, N=1194) = 29.18, p <.001), however the differences are smaller than those seen in 2018 (X^2 = (2, 1422) = 65.76, p <.001).

- Black respondents were **4.5 times** more likely to believe racism exists in the workplace than White respondents (6.5 times in 2018).

- Black respondents were **2.6 times** more likely to believe racism exists in the workplace than Asian respondents (2.8 times in 2018).

- Asian respondents were **1.8 times** more likely to believe racism exists in the workplace than White respondents (2.4 times in 2018).

Do you consider racism to be a problem in the workplace?

A smaller proportion **(74.8%)** of respondents believe that racism is a problem in the workplace.

Responses varied significantly between different racial groups in 2021 (X^2 = (2, N=1194) = 40.59, p <.001), however these differences are also smaller than in 2018 (X^2 = (2, 1422) = 51.307, p <.001).

- Black respondents were **3.3 times** more likely to consider racism a problem in the workplace than White respondents **(3.4 times in 2018)**.

- Black respondents were also **2.0 times** more likely to consider racism a problem in the workplace than Asian respondents (also 2.0 times in 2018).

- Asian respondents were **1.7 times** more likely to consider racism a problem in the workplace than White respondents (1.7 times in 2018).

When you're at work, how comfortable do you feel discussing racism?

Overall, the mean comfort level in 2021 was 59/100.

Black and Asian respondents reported similar comfort levels (53.8 and 56.4).

White respondents as a group reported being significantly more comfortable than Black (p<.001) and Asian (p<.001) respondents.

Witnessing and responding to racism at work

In the workplace, have you ever witnessed someone being racist?

More than half of respondents **(52.2%)** have witnessed racism in the workplace.

There were significant differences in the responses of individuals from different racial groups (X^2 = (2, N=1194) = 73.24, p <.001).

- Black respondents were **3.5 times** more likely to have witnessed racism in the workplace than White respondents (2.8 times in 2018).

- Black respondents were also **1.6 times** more likely to have witnessed racism in the workplace than Asian respondents (2 times in 2018).

- Asian respondents were **2.2 times** more likely to have witnessed racism in the workplace than White respondents (1.4 times in 2018).

How did you respond after witnessing this event?

Of those who said they had witnessed racism in the workplace...

- **28.3%** took no action

- **29.8%** confronted the perpetrator

- **22.4%** reported the incident to a manager or HR department

There has **been an increase since 2018** in the number of people taking action across all racial groups acting after witnessing racism in the workplace.

The percentage of people who reported the racist incident to a manager or the HR department; has increased by **7%** for Black respondents, **6%** for Asian respondents and **5%** for White respondents in the 2021 figures.

White respondents were most likely to report confronting the perpetrator but also least likely to speak to the victim in contrast to Black and Asian respondents.

What was the outcome of the action?

Of those who took action...

- **45.5%** stated that the action led to appropriate outcomes and the situation was dealt with;

- **32.3%** said that the issue was not resolved,

- **20.6%** said that the complaint was ignored, or no action was taken, and

- **1.6%** said that the action worsened the situation.

Was there a particular reason for not taking action?

Of those who took **no action**, the most common response was "I feared the consequences" **(41%)**, followed by "I didn't consider it serious enough to report" **(23%)**, "I was unsure who to talk to" **(21%)**, "It wasn't my business" **(14%)** and "I didn't have time" **(2%)**.

The percentage of White people who gave the reason "it wasn't my business" has increased by nearly **20%**.

Recognising racism

Are the following scenarios racist?

Across the racial groups, all respondents were better in 2021 at recognising racist incidents.

However, this coincides with an increase in false positives - in 2021 more respondents falsely labelled scenarios as racist that were not. This suggests that respondents in 2021 are more sensitive to racism in the workplace but are not necessarily better at recognising racism when it occurs.

The table below shows the average percentage of respondents who correctly recognised each form of racism.

		White	Asian	Black
Subtle, benevolent	**2021**	69.2%	65.6%	60.9%
Acting in a prejudiced manner and framing these behaviours as positive or beneficial to the recipient (Romani et al., 2019)	**2018**	56.9%	56.8%	56.4%
Subtle, malevolent	**2021**	39.7%	38.2%	38.6%
"Everyday racism". Subtle acts of racism that are common place and ambiguous (e.g. micro-incivilities; Kandola, 2018). These can be intentional or unintentional.	**2018**	26.7%	25.9%	26.9%
Explicit, malevolent	**2021**	96.6%	95.6%	95.5%
"Old-fashioned" racism. Behaviours that are exclusionary, verbally and/or physically antagonistic and avoidant (Blank et al., 2014).	**2018**	87.9%	88.2%	89.9%

Each group was least effective at recognising subtle, malevolent forms of racism, and accuracy was similar across each racial group.

Experiences of racism

Have you ever experienced racism in the workplace?

Overall, **34%** of the respondents in 2021 had experienced racism in the workplace.

There were significant differences in the responses of different racial groups: (X^2 = (2, N=1194) = 252.48, p <.001).

- Black respondents were **15.1 times** more likely to experience racism in the workplace than White respondents (11.1 times in 2018)**.**

- Black respondents were **1.9 times** more likely to experience racism in the workplace than Asian respondents (2.3 times in 2018).

- Asian respondents were **8.1 times** more likely to experience racism in the workplace than White respondents (4.9 times in 2018).

For Black and Asian respondents, the percentage of experiencing racism in the workplace (and subsequently, the likelihood of them experiencing racism in the workplace) has generally increased between 2018 and 2021. However, for White respondents, this has decreased.

Have you experienced any of the following situations?

Respondents were given a range of 7 scenarios depicting experiences of racism at work. Some of the headlines are:

- A smaller percentage of Black and Asian respondents had experienced intentional exclusion from work or social events because of their race in 2021.

- Black respondents reported experiencing racist scenarios more than Asian and White respondents, which is consistent with the 2018 data.

- The most common experience for Black respondents was of 'colleagues making assumptions about their ability, character or behaviour based on stereotypes about their race' and an 'over-fascination about their race' (60.7% and 56.9% respectively).

- The most common experience for Asian respondents was of 'colleagues making assumptions about their ability, character or behaviour based on stereotypes about their race' (39.8%).

- White respondents were most likely to report not experiencing any of the racist scenarios described (88.8%), and were least likely to report being asked about their race by their colleagues (0.8%).

These findings highlight the very different lived experiences of racism between racial groups.

Feelings of Stereotype Threat

Stereotype Threat (ST) is the concern of being stereotyped by others. Organisational research has found that feeling this way at work is associated with self-doubt, impaired performance and reduced engagement over time(Walton & Murphy, 2015). Just **2% of White** respondents reported feeling stereotyped due to their race, which rose to **17%** for **Asian** and **28%** for **Black** respondents. This suggests that ST - a form of Identity Threat, may create an additional source of social stress for Black and Asian employees, contributing to further inequity.

Actions taken by organisations

Overall, **49.7%** of UK respondents said that their organisation had taken action to promote greater racial equality in the workplace.

What action has been taken?

Content analysis (a method of qualitative analysis) was conducted of the actions shared by respondents. Actions could be summarised under five over-arching themes, which are included in the table below (further details are provided in the full version of our report).

Category	Number of Mentions
Championing Equality in the workplace	(174 mentions)
Education	(242 mentions)
Culture and Communication	(163 mentions)
Changing Internal Policies and Practices	(133 mentions)

How long has this activity been going on for?

Most respondents reported that their organisation had been doing this activity for more than 2 years **(46.6%)**, followed by **22.2%** of respondents' organisations doing the stated activity for 1-2 years.

With social media revolutionising the way in which people protested during the pandemic, organisations have faced increasing pressure to show what actions they have been taking to promote racial justice and to prove that they are actively anti-racism. It is plausible that due to this societal pressure, organisations started investing more in their D&I strategies and initiatives, leading to a surge in this type of activity in the last 2 years.

Implications and recommendations

Over the last three years, we have observed many UK organisations' response to the murder of George Floyd and the global reaction that ensued. Our findings highlight where progress appears to have been made, as well as where much more work is needed.

Implications of our findings

Our headline findings in 2021 reveal a similar pattern to those in 2018 - that peoples' perceptions, observations, and personal experiences of racism in the workplace vary according to their race. Overall, Black respondents were most likely to perceive, observe and personally experience racism at work, followed by Asian respondents and then White respondents. Our findings have implications for UK organisations and are discussed below.

Attitudes and perceptions

Does racism exist in the workplace?

- A similar proportion of Black and Asian respondents believe that racism exists in the workplace in 2021 as was in 2018, however there has been a 6.8% increase in the proportion of White respondents saying this. This may be linked to the level of discussion regarding race and experiences in the last three years.

- Black respondents are still most likely to believe that racism exists (4.5x as likely as White and 2.6x as likely as Asian respondents), followed by Asian respondents (1.8x as likely as White respondents).

Is it a problem?

- As in 2018, a higher proportion of respondents said that racism exists than said it was a problem. This was found across all three racial groups. This suggests that a proportion of respondents are either unaware of, or are not concerned by the impact.

Comfort discussing racism

- No groups were particularly comfortable discussing the topic (mean comfort ratings of 59/100 (White), Asian (56/100), Black (55/100). This could act as a barrier to challenging racism or discussing the issue at work. Levels of comfort have decreased except for Black respondents, who are now more confident than they were in 2018.

- As people have become more aware of racism, they may be more hesitant to discuss such issues for fear of offending members of the minority groups.

Witnessing racism

Have you ever witnessed someone being racist?

- Black respondents are still most likely to have witnessed a racist incident at work (3.5x as likely as White and 1.6x as likely as Asian respondents), followed by Asian respondents (2.2x as likely as White respondents). It is unclear whether this reflects Black and Asian respondents being more likely to be present in these situations, or more likely to notice racist incidents when they occur.

- Fewer White respondents (-6.2%) and slightly more Asian respondents (+5.1%) reported witnessing someone being racist in 2021 in contrast to 2018. The change to the response is surprising given the question is 'ever witnessed', and the reason behind it is unclear.

Recognising racism

- All groups were most effective at recognising scenarios with explicit, malevolent racism, followed by subtle, benevolent racism and subtle malevolent racism. This is similar to 2018. All respondents were better at recognising racist scenarios in 2021. This could indicate a general trend that UK employees are now better at recognising racist behaviours, or it may reflect a greater sensitivity to racism, as respondents were more likely to identity non-racist scenarios as racist.

Taking action

- The most commonly reported action was 'confronting the perpetrator' (15.6%), followed by 'reporting the incident to a manager or HR' (11.7%). 'Filing a complaint with an authority figure' was the action that had the highest "resolved" rate (60.7%).

- White respondents were most likely to report taking some form of action (77%), followed by Black respondents (72%) and Asian respondents (67%). There has been a fall in the proportion of 'no action' responses for each group (since 2018, -5% for White; -3% for Asian, and -6% for Black respondents).

- White respondents in 2021 were more likely to give 'It wasn't my business' as a reason for not taking action (+ nearly 20% since 2018), and less likely to say 'I was unsure who to talk to' (-7.5% since 2018). This may be a shift in rationale to justify inaction.

Experiences of racism at work

- Overall, 34% of respondents have experienced racism at work, with most of them being from Black (61.4%) and Asian (46%) backgrounds.

- Black people are 15.14x more likely to experience racism at work than White people and 1.87x more than Asian people; Asian people are 8.1x more likely to experience racism at work than White people.

- The majority of White people (88.8%) reported no experiences of specific racist scenarios described, compared to 34.8% of Asians and 15.7% of Black people. This further highlights significant differences in the experiences of UK employees.

Organisational action

- 'Education' was the most frequently cited theme of action taken by organisations, with many references to workshops on anti-racism training and general awareness raising.

- 'Changing internal policies and practices' to make them more inclusive, and making it easier to report racism at work to senior colleagues were also frequently cited. This is encouraging, and suggests that organisations are addressing barriers to reporting, which can hide its prevalence. Reports that organisations are practicing better employment practices, promoting equal opportunities and promoting positive action suggests that some efforts are being made to address structural inequities.

- This survey was conducted in September 2021, 16 months after the murder of George Floyd. Most respondents reported their companies had taken action to promote racial equality in the workplace for more than 2 years. This would mean that the majority of organisations' actions pre-dated the murder of George Floyd.

- Despite this, 50.2% of UK respondents reported that their organisation was not doing anything to promote racial equality at work, 16 months after the murder of George Floyd.

Headline recommendations

Based on our findings, we offer the following headline recommendations:

- **Recognise that experiences will differ between racial groups**

- **Recognise that experiences will differ *within* racial groups**

- **Educate employees on different forms of racism**

- **Make challenging racism everyone's business**

- **Develop employees' skills in how to be an active bystander and on how to challenge**

- **Have a clear dignity at work / respect at work policy**

Further details of our findings, their implications and our recommendations are available in the full-length version of our report.

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