

# Getting the message across: using media to reduce racial prejudice and discrimination

## Background and aims of the research

Social policy in the United Kingdom increasingly aims to facilitate changes in harmful beliefs, motivations and behaviours. Racial prejudice is one issue that the Government is seeking to tackle. Negative attitudes towards minority groups are viewed by many as a potentially important determinant of social exclusion and disadvantage in the labour market. Therefore tackling prejudice and discrimination is viewed as fundamental to fostering a cohesive society, as well as to ensuring individuals' wellbeing.

Communities and Local Government commissioned this research to examine what works, what is promising and what does not work and why in the use of the media to reduce racial prejudice in England and Wales. The geographical scope of the project was widened to determine whether valuable additional lessons might be learned from the 'One Scotland: Many Cultures' campaign. The research was commissioned as a result of a recommendation in the Government's strategy to redress racial inequalities in the labour force<sup>1</sup>. The review brings together literature on racial prejudice, crime reduction and the social psychology of media use.

The research examines how to design, implement and evaluate the effectiveness of awareness campaigns to reduce racial prejudice. Promising practice is identified along with suitable strategies for minimising short-term and/or long-term racial prejudice.

<sup>1</sup> Cabinet Office (2003) Ethnic Minorities and the Labour Market. London: Cabinet Office

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The central aim of the research is to determine the most effective methods of persuasively communicating messages to counteract racial prejudice so that findings can assist decision making for future media-based initiatives. The information in this report can be used to guide implementation, targeting, design, message content, delivery and evaluation of programmes that seek to tackle prejudice and discrimination, and develop greater community cohesion and social inclusion.

## Method

The findings in this study stem from a review of the literature concerning effective communication in anti-racism and discrimination, an examination of a number of media-based initiatives to reduce racial prejudice and a retrospective evaluation, using the realist approach, of three national campaigns. Realist evaluation involves examining how a programme is supposed to work and then determines if that basic plan is plausible, durable, practical and valid.

The review comprises material written and published between 1990 and 2005. Focusing specifically upon what is known about good practice in the use of media to reduce prejudice, a total of 65 documents, including published and unpublished reports, CD-ROMS, books, book chapters and journal articles were examined and reviewed in detail.

## Findings

Media-based campaigns represent one medium for effectively influencing people's attitudes on a range of social issues. However, awareness campaigns specifically on race equality and anti-racism have been implemented sporadically across the United Kingdom over the last 15 years. They have been run by central government in Scotland, by organizations such as the Commission for Racial Equality and by independent organizations, and

have been used in human resources training in government organisations, educational institutions, and multinational corporations. Although some campaigns have proved effective in influencing people's attitudes, others appear to have reaffirmed stereotypes.

Little research has been conducted into the impact of media campaigns or other prejudice reduction programmes on beliefs, and even less on their impact upon the behaviour of racially prejudiced individuals, victims or those witnessing racial prejudice. Social psychology research on what works and what is promising in reducing prejudice and stimulating attitude change has been largely ignored in the design of media-based initiatives to reduce racial prejudice. This makes it difficult for policy makers to develop a business case for using such media initiatives to reduce racial prejudice, and restricts sharing of good practice among practitioners, local authorities, other organisations, and employers.

Use of the media to reduce racial and ethnic prejudice is a strangely neglected research area. The review of the literature, databases and other sources such as websites revealed that only a handful of programmes and campaigns have been implemented and documented. Fewer still have had any kind of even basic evaluation. This makes it difficult, if not impossible, to point to specific strategies as examples of how to reduce effectively racial and ethnic prejudice. Consequently, this report offers guidelines to consider when planning and implementing campaigns in the future. In particular, this report concludes that campaign designers should understand how the structure, content and delivery of the message are likely to operate, as mechanisms for intended change (in particular social contexts) when aiming to deliver a persuasive communication.

### *Key conclusions are:*

- Initiatives using media to reduce racial prejudice can be divided into campaigns (a series of distinct co-ordinated activities) and programmes (effectively stand-alone projects)
- Very little research has been conducted into the actual impact of media campaigns or programmes on beliefs, which has made it difficult for policy makers to develop a business case for using such media initiatives to reduce racial prejudice
- There is currently no definitive evidence of what works in prejudice and discrimination reduction
- However, the evidence from social psychology and realist evaluation lends itself to identifying promising practice in the design and evaluation of campaigns to reduce racial prejudice and discrimination
- Initiatives to date have sought to reduce racially prejudiced beliefs/specific types of racial discrimination in certain settings/specific types of victimisation
- Altering physical and social situational elements, in precise locations where discrimination takes place, may also lead to reduced discrimination in locations beyond those where situational factors are employed
- If a source is seen as having credibility, attractiveness, expertise, status, and power it is more likely to reduce prejudice
- Repetition of the message is more likely to reduce prejudice
- Use of facts and information is not sufficient to change attitudes
- An initiative aimed at those who practise racial discrimination might be unintentionally patronising to those who experience its impacts first-hand

- When presenting a message, contrast is key. Salient communications are more likely to get the intended recipient's attention
- A message is more likely to be effective if it is straightforward, jargon-free and avoids emotionally extreme language
- Realist evaluation can be a useful technique to evaluate the success of an initiative to reduce racial prejudice or racial discrimination.

### **Recommendations**

Relatively recent research emphasises the need to be clear about audience targeting and the need to design campaigns to take account of the attitudes, opinions and complexities of specific audiences that messages are intended for.

The primary aim of an initiative to reduce racial prejudice or discrimination should be to change the lives of victims of racial discrimination for the better. Yet unless careful attention is paid to what we know about effective advertising in initiatives to reduce prejudice, some campaigns and programmes might actually backfire and increase people's prejudice. Efforts to reduce racial prejudice or discrimination may, for example, be interpreted as favouritism towards one ethnic group.

Clearly, there is a need for those who design media based initiatives to gather data about the attitudes and opinions that are held by intended audiences, the factors underpinning them and to assess what motivation there might be for target audiences to accept the messages aimed at them. Initiatives should then be tested with target audiences prior to launching, and monitored throughout, to maximise efficacy and minimise the risk of programmes backfiring.

### Key recommendations are:

- Understanding how a campaign message is interpreted is critical
- Outcomes may be unintended as well as intended
- To reduce racially prejudiced beliefs, initiatives should utilise knowledge from studies of the social psychology of attitude change
- Emphasise how groups are similar rather than distinct from each other
- Use messages that contradict stereotypes.
- Each message should highlight only one minority ethnic group at a time
- Initiatives to reduce victimisation might be best employed as part of a wider campaign rather than as a stand-alone programme.
- Organisations implementing such initiatives should ensure that surveys to monitor impact are fit for purpose methodologically and in terms of quality
- Campaigns and programmes must set aims higher than simply awareness raising, to measure effectiveness in reducing prejudice and discrimination
- Thinking about evaluation at the design stage, and budgeting for it at the outset, will better shape the initiative
- The precise mechanism by which an initiative is intended to bring about the aims of the programme must be identified
- The social, political and dynamic context in which a programme is to take place must be understood before initiatives are implemented. This will inform likely replicability.

### Further Information

Further information is contained in the full report *Getting the message across: using media to reduce racial prejudice and discrimination*, by Mike Sutton, Barbara Perry, Jonathan Parke and Catherine John-Baptiste. Available on the Communities and Local Government website.

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