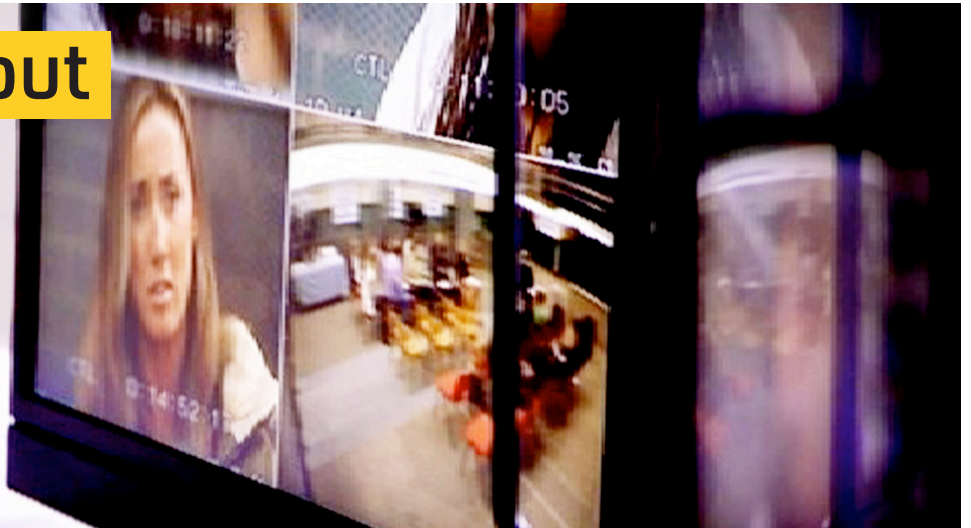


# Power without Oppression

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*Do we have it within ourselves to exercise power without oppressing those without?*

Many of those unfamiliar with Jane Elliott's classic 'eye colour' training exercise are often taken aback when confronted with its results and their implications for the nature of humans: when given access to power the human seeks not to share those privileges with the powerless, but instead, consciously chooses to oppress the other using a range of excuses as justification.

The objective of Elliott's original training exercise was for her students to:

1. Learn that racism is a **social construct**;
2. Understand that **everyone** is subject to a set of prejudices;
3. Recognise and challenge this prejudice.

Elliott's hoped that by experiencing a form of discrimination that would illuminate the senselessness of prejudice by tackling narrow-mindedness based on eye colour and reveal paths to help address this issue.

Through this exercise Elliott found that clearly methods of discrimination are being passed down, sometimes on a sub conscious level to those belonging to a privileged group. She also found that the opposite is true: the expectation of oppression is often acquired as a form of defence by those who historically see themselves as powerless. These exercises also surprisingly reveal that both the oppressed and the oppressor are exposed to psychological scarring.

For the oppressor, the fear of pain often leads us to bury these thoughts or, causes our conscious mind to feign unawareness of our power to oppress. These thoughts remain and without challenging the scars embedded in our psyche many are inevitably robbed of their own humanity. How is it I remain comfortable whilst knowing I continue to gain from the suffering of another? It gets deeper, we then ask, can anyone truly be human under the forces of such oppression, where they are condemned to a life where injustice is at the core, where their free will is exhausted and subservience is a prerequisite for survival? If this is true then why do they accept it, perhaps they really are subhuman? (Leary, 2005)

We as individuals have a habit of using ignorance to construct our world from concepts that make us feel good about ourselves. This of course impacts on how we perceive racism. It should therefore

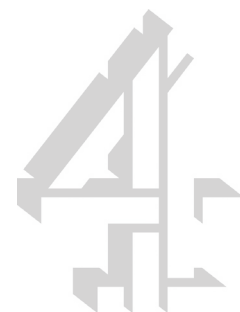
come as no surprise that many people shut down when they are confronted with the word 'racist'. Sometimes this is due to fear of other people's reactions. On the flip side it may also be the case that for those who have lived with the effects of racism they feel too vulnerable and too disempowered to address it.

## Elliott's Exercise: UK 2009

Elliott's exercise, in my opinion did not follow the original plan that she had been witnessing for so many years, nevertheless she did manage to obtain some interesting reactions. Some people stated that they were not responsible for the inequalities that others experienced on a day to day basis as those inequalities happened outside of their control. Others had difficulty making a connection with some of their unconscious beliefs and the impact these 'silent' beliefs may have exerted during their day to day life.

At this stage it is important to note that whilst Elliott's training exercise ultimately focused on the theme of racist discrimination, there are other forms of inequality many of us may face in our everyday lives. For example women simultaneously have to face gender discrimination on top of wider societal injustices.

You see moral silences alongside denial are key enablers of abuse and to not collude with systems imposing inequalities takes far more than the overt demonstration of racism or prejudice. Maybe this is what has made Jane Elliott's mission to reveal racism, so hard?



## Prejudice or Racism?

In simplistic terms racism refers to a persistent inequality where individuals in a society inherit an inferior social status on the basis of ethnicity. The results can manifest themselves in many forms but in essence it is the exclusion of people from full and equal participation in that lifestyle we all collectively perceive as being valuable, important, personally worthwhile and socially desirable.

The Oxford Dictionary defines 'racism' as:

- noun 1** the belief that there are characteristics, abilities, or qualities specific to each race.
- 2** discrimination against or antagonism towards other races.

Racism can be experienced in many ways. Direct discrimination is deliberate and obvious. Harassment typically occurs in environments where those in power allow the space to become hostile towards members of a particular group. But it is often indirect discrimination that is the most damaging. This is where practices or policies that disadvantage those belonging to specific groups are denied, leading to institutionalised victimisation.

Racism and prejudice are so easily intertwined that many people confuse the terms which can lead to the erroneous assumption that overt racism no longer exists.

The Oxford Dictionary defines 'prejudice' as:

- noun 1** preconceived opinion that is not based on reason or experience.
- 2** unjust behaviour formed on such a basis.

## Racism cuts both ways

Many who have experienced oppression inherit prejudices borne from their experiences. These prejudices can represent as a form of detestation towards all those who they feel are part of the collective group responsible for their social disadvantages.

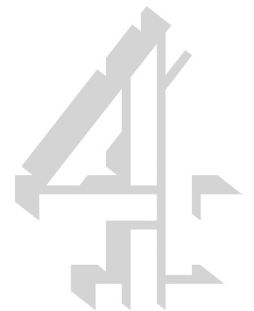
Whilst this response may create fear and/ or anger, it does not alter the fact that the frustration fuelling these reactions is generated on the questionable premise that, the only people with the power to remove discriminatory barriers are those responsible for creating them.

## Recognising Prejudice

What still remains paramount and what Jane Elliott's exercise generally reveals is how quickly a person is able to recognise prejudice. Whether they are thoughts held private or revealed in discussions with trusted people. Whether you act upon it or pretend it never happened, social inequality flourishes when it is not challenged. Could it be that what Jane Elliott's 2009 UK exercise tentatively revealed was a representation of what happens when private prejudiced thoughts based on a racist ideology are highlighted and questioned?

To identify the act of racism in all of its insidious and pervasive forms can be extremely challenging. However, it is important not to forget the biology of racism. We are wired to like people that are similar to us. We also have the propensity to feel supported and protected by people who are similar to us but we fear being attacked by people who are different to us. Therefore, present within all of us is a natural "fight/flight" response from the more primal part of our brain which deals with survival issues.

We become afraid of people that can hurt us both physically and emotionally because their values and beliefs often seem so different to ours. It is this biology of racism that cannot be dealt with immediately. So even though Elliott managed to challenge the unconscious racism of some people, things will only improve when we all openly apply power to eradicating the veils of ignorance that seek to divide us all. As Dr Martin Luther King Jr states; "In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends".



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appeared on *The Event: How Racist Are You?*