UNIVERSITY OF LIVERPOOL

Heseltine Institute for Public Policy, Practice and Place

INNOVATIONS IN PUBLIC POLICY

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Anti-racist institutionalism

Embedding racial equity in English devolution

- Institutional racism is accepted in academic and policy discourse as one of the causes of racial inequalities in a variety of policy domains. If we define institutions not as organisations, but as 'sets of rules, practices and narratives', we can better understand how institutional racism functions to (re)produce racial inequalities.
- Anti-racist institutionalism is an analytical lens for identifying how institutional racism functions. It has two propositions. Firstly, that rules, practices and narratives are racialised due to unequal power dynamics, meaning they embody certain values and privilege white interests. Secondly, these racialised institutions can be transformed intentionally by policy actors.
- English devolution offers the opportunity to embed anti-racist institutionalism as part of its programme of decentralising and distributing power to people across the country. However, there is a risk that devolution in its current form reinforces rather than addresses racial inequalities.

Introduction

The latest **English Devolution White Paper**, published in December 2024, is silent on tackling racial inequalities. This is concerning, as racially minoritised communities are more likely to bear the brunt of regional and health inequalities. Racial inequalities in the UK persist and have increased since the COVID-19 pandemic for a wide range of economic, social and health outcomes (Nazroo et al, 2023). Without an explicit understanding of how race and racism contribute to worse outcomes for an increasingly diverse population in England, the **cost of racism** (both human and economic) is likely to increase.

Since the publication of the White Paper, the UK government has announced the formation of a **Race Equality Engagement Group** chaired by Baroness

Lawrence of Clarendon, mother of Stephen Lawrence, who has tirelessly worked to tackle institutional racism following the murder of her son. Institutional racism became prominent in policy discourse through the **Macpherson report**, following an inquiry into the investigation of Stephen's murder. Understanding how the presence of institutional racism contributes to the persistence of racial inequalities is a foundational element for achieving racial equity. Racial equity is achieved when there is a (re)distribution of resources to support racially minoritised people's flourishing by removing structural constraints that prevent them from living decent lives.

Anti-racist institutionalism

Achieving racial equity relies on institutions working towards this objective. Writing in *Social Policy and Administration*, I conceptualise **anti-racist institutionalism** (ARI) as a way to embed this objective, with two propositions. The first theoretical proposition is that institutions (sets of rules, practices, and narratives) are racialised due to unequal power dynamics. Anti-racism begins with analyses of marginalisation and inequality experienced by racially minoritised people from a basis of relations of power and domination (Leah, 1995) and an understanding of the centrality and normality of racism in a racialised society (Delgado and Stefancic, 2017).

Examples of racialised narratives include 'dangerous' Black men and boys, 'aggressive' Black women and girls and 'submissive' Muslim women and girls. Practices (informal rules) are routines, customs, traditions and conventions that are part of habitual action and specific to a particular governmental setting (Lowndes, 2014). Racialised practices include colour-blindness (insistence *only* on treating everyone the same across the board without paying attention to distributional advantages in a racialised society) and racial microaggressions and ethnocentrism (perceiving racially minoritised groups as inferior to white people). Formal rules include legislation, written constitutions, policies and contractual agreements (Lowndes, 2014). While rules might be neutral, they can lead to the (re)production of racial inequalities because how rules, regulations, bureaucratic hierarchies and surveillance techniques are used to ensure compliance can be influenced by bigotry, racial microaggressions and ethnocentrism (Collins, 2000).

The second proposition is that institutions can be transformed intentionally by policy actors. By understanding how racialised power operates, policy actors can make conscious efforts to remedy its effects (Jones, 2002; Paradies, 2005). For example, policy actors can use the UK's 2010 Equality Act and other race-neutral rules to *support* racial equity goals. For example, the public sector equality duty in the Equality Act provides opportunities for transforming racialised institutions. If policy actors listen to the voices of colour - the lived experiences of racially minoritised people - their counter-narratives can challenge racialised narratives. Policy actors can also request (re)allocation of budgets and align performance management targets to achieve racial equity goals.

Racial equity and the opportunity English devolution brings

As Emma Ormerod reflects on the **invisibility of gender in the devolution agenda**, the same can be said for race. The lack of racial representation, both descriptive and substantive, in political, practice and academic ecosystems means insufficient attention is paid to how to address racial inequalities. Reflecting on this lack of representation, Tocqueville, one of the earliest thinkers on democracy, asks that we pay attention to *whom* power is willingly or unwillingly shared. Paying attention to power goes beyond the inclusion of communities that have been historically excluded from democracy. It also encourages reflection on how power and privilege function in ways that exclude certain topics, such as tackling racial inequalities, from being included in the devolution agenda. English devolution, in its current form, is likely to replicate rather than interrupt the persistence of racial inequalities. However, there remain opportunities to implement devolution differently.

The English Devolution White Paper emphasises working in partnership with communities. It is through meaningful partnerships with racially minoritised communities that racialised institutions can be identified and transformed so that policies and services become more effective, contributing to building places where all people flourish. Sub-national governments can choose to expend political capital to pursue racial equity through their unique political, economic, social, and community development roles in improving the quality of lives for racially minoritised people. For example, Liverpool City Region has developed a **Race Equality Programme** and funded a **Race Equality Hub**, while Greater Manchester has developed a **Race Equity Framework**.

An intentionality by subnational leaders to transform racialised institutions is key to achieving racial equity. As racially minoritised people report high levels of engagement in political and civic life and have strong attachments to the places they live (Nazroo et al., 2023), devolution widens the window of opportunity to work with communities to understand and minimise the structural constraints operating in their lives.

Mayors and combined authorities can partner with racially minoritised communities because people know their experiences best and can advise policy actors on where resources ought to be (re)distributed. There is scope for devolution to provide conditions to test out approaches for meaningful involvement of racially minoritised people to address racial inequalities within and across the regions. This could be achieved by embedding community organising principles, where people create spaces themselves and build power to influence the governance of a place (Cornwall, 2008). This approach has had **success** in California, where regional and state-level partners worked with racially minoritised communities to implement policy and systems changes, and secure tangible benefits.

The English devolution agenda needs to deepen the involvement of racially minoritised people, so there is a chance to advance racial equity in England. Rather than replicating Westminster's centralised power structures, there is real scope to decentralise and distribute power to ordinary people across the country. A democratisation of devolution and more involvement of racially minoritised communities in the governance of regions provides channels through which the voices of colour can identify racialised institutions, counter racialised narratives, and influence the changes required for new rules and practices. In the current political climate, a focus on race and racism might be deemed divisive or politically unfavourable. However, by leveraging resources to challenge racism and develop equity tools, an intersectional approach recognises that this focus can positively impact all communities experiencing inequalities to create an equitable and just society for all.

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