

I'm a Researcher – Get me out of here! (3)

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Is Race an Issue in Insights?

I am sometimes criticized for being too passionate on the issue of racial discrimination and, indeed, have seen some relationships disappear as a result. Some may equally think that this article, now, is simply availing of a popular topic, but nothing could be further from the truth. One of the benefits of the COVID pandemic is that we have been afforded the opportunity to re-assess what is important in life and important to our world; equality sits right at the top of that list. We are one human race...no matter the colour of our skin, we all bleed red....and so recent events, which resulted from the George Floyd tragedy, have simply been amplified by our reinvigorated sense of humanity stemming from lockdown.

I am passionate about this topic because I grew up in apartheid South Africa. I have witnessed the atrocities and misery that occur when racism becomes institutionalized, as well as some of the more specious arguments as to why it is a 'necessary evil'.

I have also witnessed some of these atrocities very close to home. In 1976, my father – Bishop Graham Chadwick – was elected Bishop of Kimberley and Kuruman, essentially the whole northwestern part of the country. During the schools boycott, many of his African clergy were arrested by the secret police and tortured to reveal the names of the organizers of the boycott. One of these, a priest named Phakamile Majiba (after whom a street is now named in Kimberley) "fell" to his death from a seventh-floor window of police headquarters while being interrogated. In 1982, I witnessed my own father being arrested, imprisoned and later exiled by these same secret police.

Why do you need to know this? So that you may appreciate the depth of my hatred of racism. It is indeed a topic of the utmost relevance right now not only in the United States, which is where I live, but all around the world. The scenes we have witnessed in recent days and weeks – which are, sadly nothing new in the African American experience – should force all of us to ask, "are we complicit?" and "could I be doing more?"

Racism is not always an overt act and, to be clear, I have never witnessed an overt act of this nature in our profession. But sometimes it *is* an act of omission, thoughtlessness or negligence – and whether intentional or not, its impact on its subject is the same. This led me to question two aspects of our own industry, especially in North America and Europe. The first is why are there disproportionately fewer black and brown people in market research than their numbers in the overall population suggest there should be? It is indisputable that there are many outstanding black researchers and leaders in the industry but nonetheless they are a tiny minority in the overall scheme of things. Why? Can our profession/industry not just reach out

to inform black and brown graduates that this is exactly where they want to be? There has been a great push among our associations – with some success – to attract young people to research. WiRE has recorded great success in promoting gender equality in the industry. Is it beyond us to make a similar push to attract BAME community members too? Let us challenge ourselves to initiate such a push right now!

The second question that arose in my mind is why BAME citizens, undocumented immigrants (who number 11 million in the US) and the elderly are so often woefully under-represented in what is taken for a gen pop sample? The facile response to this is either that they are difficult to reach or that this is not where purchasing power lies. But I believe that the underlying meaning of this is that it's not worth the money to reach out to them, whether that be in research budgets or marketing budgets. Or even product development budgets.

Hmmm - Have you ever wondered why the plasters we put on our skins to help heal wounds are all pink?

And another interesting nugget: a client of ours who invented an ingenious method of sampling to ensure highly accurate representation of all parts of the population was criticized – *criticized* – for an overabundance of blacks, immigrants and the elderly! Surely it is time, whether you are a client, an agency or a sample supplier, to take a good, hard look at who we are researching and why. And, if these groups are not included, then to have a damn good answer as to why that should be.

Now is the time for the industry and profession to take serious action to address these issues. As a starting point, let me suggest four easily implementable initiatives: (1) agencies, corporate research departments and associations to join together in a coordinated, sustained and broad outreach to BAME students in colleges, universities and schools; (2) scholarships and mentorship programmes aimed at enabling such students to take their place in the profession; (3) the establishment of a diversity management education programme, spearheaded by the associations; (4) new and refreshed guidelines on sampling and research design aimed at ensuring that research, whether commercial, political or social, really is listening to historically-marginalized communities.

Finally, these questions forced me to ask one of myself – a really hard one. Have I, as a leader, an influencer, a practitioner in this industry, really done enough myself to combat discrimination and racism in the profession? Sure, I've promoted, mentored and encouraged minority researchers when the occasion has arisen. But was that really enough? And the answer is a resounding "no". When I was Chairman of our national association, this was not at the top of my priority list, although we did seek diversity on the Board of Directors. When I was a CEO, I didn't actively promote our profession or our company in historically black colleges.

In short, I could do better. We all could. Let's start now.