Racism and Racial Discrimination from a Systems Thinking Perspective


Submission (15th December 2021) from Dr Martin Reynolds in response to request from Dr Sukai Prom-Jackson (Appendix) as part of Advisory Group of Experts: Joint Investigation Unit (JIU) Review “Measures and Mechanisms for Preventing and Addressing Racism and Racial Discrimination in the Institutions of the United Nations System”

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Systems thinking in practice (STiP) and developmental evaluation (DE) in relation to a benchmarking framework

1. Introduction

The contents of this thought piece arise from two online meetings with the JIU team headed by Sukai Prom-Jackson on 1st October and 5th November, 2021 along with accompanying correspondence and sharing of work-in-progress documents generated by the project team. The ideas are provided in response to an invitation from Project Lead Dr Sukai Prom-Jackson to be a member of an Advisory Group of Experts (Appendix provides my initial response to the request).

The aim of this document is to contribute towards the development of a benchmarking framework as designed by Dr Prom-Jackson. There are no firm recommendations. It is hoped that some of these ideas might be helpful (along with other sources of expert support being received and collated by the Project team...) in crafting an appropriate benchmarking framework for identifying incidences of racism and racial discrimination and for improving UN workplace practices accordingly.

All exhibits are originals from the author.

2. Context for the review

2.1 An early working document from the JIU review states:

“The value-oriented and results-based benchmarking framework provides an organizing framework for the assessment of organizational performance in addressing racism and racial discrimination – This includes: what measure and mechanism are conceptualized and adopted? What is the quality of the measures and mechanism? It is work in progress” (JIU Working Document. September, 2021. Technical Note on Benchmarking Framework)

2.2 Work in progress presents 11 pillars of a benchmarking framework (as from November 2021)

1 Source: Compendium of Annexes to the Organizational Level Questionnaire - System-wide Review of
Pillar 1  Overriding foundations and drivers
Pillar 2  Values: vision and guiding principles (dignity, equity, inclusion, diversity (DEID))
Pillar 3  Organisational goals (Trust, Integrity and Dignity) of the UN system
Pillar 4  Organisational outcomes and benefits
Pillar 5  Policy framework for (i) stand-alone policy and/or (ii) embedded in various policies
Pillar 6  Strategy for effectiveness, impact and sustainability
Pillar 7  Managing for achieving effectiveness
Pillar 8  Managing for achieving impact
Pillar 9  Managing for achieving sustainability
Pillar 10  Managing for achieving coherence
Pillar 11  Way forward for UN system in VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous) world

2.3 The notes below aims to support this work in progress from a systems thinking in practice (STiP) perspective. As well as STiP, the review draws on ideas from developmental evaluation (DE). It will use a reference system based on critical systems heuristics (CSH) from the STiP tradition as a source for developing a theory of change as part of DE to provide high level ‘coherence’ for the framework (pillar 10)

3. Some principles of STiP in relation to a benchmarking framework

3.1 Situations (e.g. racism and racial discrimination) are different from systems (conceptually bounded constructs for understanding and acting upon racism and racial discrimination)

3.2 A system can be regarded as “a (i) collection of entities that are (ii) seen by someone as (iii) interacting together (iv) to do something” (Morris, 2009 p.16). Critically, systems are constructs; perspectives on the real world — i.e. maps of the territory (‘seen by someone’) not the actual territory. Systems are essentially bounded by purpose — a system does something.

3.3 A situation comprises unbounded events, people, and ideas in continual flux (the ‘world’ of VUCA -volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous). Institutions associated with the UN (including the UN itself) can be understood as ‘systems’ - sense-making constructs occupying the realm of ideas in the flux of events, people, and ideas. Each of the 28 organisations of the UN can be regarded as a system of interest.

3.4 Systems can be perceived as working at different hierarchical levels. Any situation can be viewed in terms of systems bounded at the micro, meso, or macro level depending on any particular individual’s choice of boundaries. So for example, the UN might be regarded as a ‘system’ at the meso level – inviting questions regarding it’s own micro sub-systems – for example the 28 individual organisations making up the UN, and the higher level macro supra-system – for example the international regulatory framing giving legitimacy to the UN. Alternatively each UN organisation may be regarded at the meso-level, inviting questions regarding the particular micro sub-systems making up the organisation (departments in the organisation) and the macro supra-system including that of the UN which provides for it’s legitimacy. How an individual bounds a situation as a system in relation to micro, meso, macro depends on the purpose for making such boundary judgements (Exhibit 1).
Systems of focus (or systems of interest) are by definition identified at the ‘meso-level’ – inviting a finer focus on sub-systems constituting the system of interest and the wider environment in which the system of interest is situated (which might in itself be conceptualised as a macro-system).

3.5 Systems are conceptually bounded constructs used for understanding situations (diagnostic devices) and for improving situations (design devices). Rendering situations as systems of interest allows for understanding the interrelationships between component parts (the subsystems that contribute towards making the system ‘work’). Rendering also allows for engagement of other viewpoints/perspectives on other possible systems of interest in order to see desirable and feasible system change.

3.6 Transforming situations into ‘systems’ requires making judgements. There is in systems thinking a continual interplay between making factual judgements about the reality of the situation and using value judgements to make that interpretation of reality. ‘Systems’ as conceptual constructs enable the interplay between factual and value judgements to be transparently mediated by boundary judgements. The triadic interplay between these three judgements is called systemic triangulation (Exhibit 2) an underpinning pragmatic notion of boundary critique (Ulrich and Reynolds, 2020). Exhibit 2 signals the relationship between boundary critique and the act of benchmarking based on a results-based, values-driven approach as signalled in the JIU terms of reference.
Exhibit 2: Dynamics of a results-based, values-driven approach to benchmarking racism and racial discrimination aligned with systemic triangulation (boundary critique).

3.7 Systems thinking relates to a continual interplay between systemic thinking (getting the bigger picture/ separating the forest (Wood) from the trees/being holistic), and systematic thinking (joined up thinking/ planning/ being reductionistic). It is the duality between the two that matters for systems thinking rather than continually privileging one over the other (expressed as either overly-assertive holism or rigid reductionism). Exhibit 3 illustrates the distinction between systemic and systematic thinking in relation to systemic triangulation.

Exhibit 3: Systems thinking dimensions of boundary critique Illustrating both systemic and systematic orientations

3.8 It may be helpful conceptualising the underlying UN JIU project in terms of exploring an interplay between systemic racism and systematic racial discrimination. Benchmarking racism might be regarded as a system of interest at the meso-level (system level) inviting questions in relation to manifestations of systemic racism at the macro-level (supra-system).
and manifestations of *systematic racial discrimination* at the micro-level (sub-systems of, say, individual practices)

3.9 The systemic and systematic dualities to look for in association with racism might be regarded in terms of three sets of activity couplings pivoted around core principles of addressing discrimination in the workplace; Justice, Trust, and Governance: Exhibit 4 illustrates these couplings in terms of (i) results-based transformation (planning interventions); (ii) values-driven evaluation (implementing interventions); and (iii) adaptive-assured governance. Each coupling can be expressed in terms of being ‘developmental’.

![Exhibit 4: Influence diagram illustrating systemic triangulation of workplace dynamics in UN agencies: Illustrating systemic and systematic orientations](image)

4. Benchmarking framework based on systems thinking

4.1 The essential idea of a benchmarking framework is to map out the contours of a system in terms of (i) exploring inter-relationships - making ‘factual’ judgements, by way of (ii) engaging with perspectives - through value judgements, in order to (iii) reflect on and revise boundary judgements. The three activities represent the systems thinking in practice (STiP) heuristic (Reynolds, 2011; Reynolds and Holwell, 2020)

4.2 Benchmarking framework (or any framework) can be helpfully regarded as a single bounded (whole) system of interest. There are perhaps four inter-related components (i) the situation being benchmarked – e.g. the 28 organisations of UN understood as either 28 separate systems or 28 sub-systems of the UN system, (ii) a developmental evaluation system for purposes of monitoring and developing value (and encouraging learning), and (iii) a regulatory system for purposes of initially transparently diagnosing a situation (and encouraging accountability) but moreover for improving the situation (by encouraging adaptation) amongst individual stakeholders associated with system(s) identified and being benchmarked. A further component might be helpful in a benchmarking framework which may act as (iv) a common reference system for providing coherence. Exhibit 5 illustrates the benchmarking framework as a proposed bounded system of interest, comprising the four (sub) systems described above.
Exhibit 5: A benchmarking framework as a bounded ‘system-wide’ system of interest composing four discrete (sub)systems – (i) collection of ‘systems’ representing x28 organisations of the UN-wide system; (ii) learning system for monitoring and evaluating performance of the UN affiliated systems; (iii) regulatory system for ensuring appropriate accountability; all of which are informed by (iv) a reference system providing the core theory of change driving the benchmarking framework.

4.3 A reference system might be conceptualised as a theory of change (ToC); an evaluation device based on participatory understanding of interrelationships and identifying conditions needing to unfold for long-term goals to be met (cf. Weiss, 1995). Critically, a ToC also surfaces underpinning assumptions (or Worldviews) behind the expression of goals. The assumptions can then be tested.

4.4 The four systems might then be aligned with the 11 pillars of the benchmarking system suggested in the interim report (Exhibit 6).
4.5 A theory of change for benchmarking racism and racial discrimination can itself be formulated as a system of interest. Sections 6 and 7 flush out some ideas of an appropriate reference system for benchmarking racism and racial discrimination based on critical systems heuristics (CSH).

5. Some principles of developmental evaluation (DE) and racism

5.1 Any situation of interest (with actual or potential racism and racial discrimination) might be regarded as an *evaluand* subject to ongoing evaluation (or benchmarking) amongst *all people* involved with and affected by racism.

5.2 Developmental evaluation (DE) is integral, rather than external, to or separate from, an evaluand. In this regard, DE can be regarded as small ‘e’ evaluation contrasted with conventional big ‘E’ evaluation sometimes regarded as evaluation by ‘external audit’. Developmental evaluation (DE) can be facilitated by ‘experts’ but ideally requires all stakeholders to be ongoing developmental evaluators (a deeper integral form of participatory evaluation).

5.3 DE involves a continual interplay between (i) ‘summative’ systemic evaluation - understanding the value dynamics of the evaluand including dignity, equity, inclusion, diversity (DEID) – and (ii) more ‘formative’ systematic evaluation – developing trust, integrity and dignity to the evaluand; that is, *developing* value in contrast with the more conventional (and judgemental) exercise of ‘determining’ value (cf. Schwandt and Gates, 2021).

5.4 DE might be regarded as sub-system of a wider benchmarking meso-system framework.

5.5 The criteria for developmental evaluation can be clustered towards three sets (i) *efficacy*, with a focus on outputs (is the system doing the intended work?), (ii) *efficiency* with a focus on inputs (is the system working coherently with appropriately identified sub-systems of activities?), and (iii) *effectiveness* with a focus on outcomes and impacts (is the system prone towards systemic betterment or systemic failure?). The effectiveness criteria invites...
attention to the uncertainties of the environment in which a system performs, and critically the adaptiveness of the system to the changing environment (Reynolds et al., 2020)

5.6 The three criteria applies whether ‘the system’ represents a particular UN organisation subject to evaluation (1st order benchmarking), or whether ‘the system’ represents a benchmarking framework itself for evaluating a UN organisation (2nd order benchmarking).

5.7 Those responsible for facilitating DE can be regarded as reflexive practitioners able to navigate between 1st and 2nd order benchmarking, navigating between being systemic and systematic (Schmidt-Abbey et al., 2020)

6. Critical systems heuristics (CSH): a reference system for benchmarking racism

7.1 The most simple reference system used in systems thinking is one bounded by questions of what? how? and why? (Armson, 2011, chapter 13). Such ‘simple systems’ can be further unfolded into more elaborate systems models such as in the use of system dynamics (causal loops and system archetypes cf. John Forrester and Peter Senge), or viable systems model (cf. Stafford Beer and Patrick Hoverstadt). Critical systems heuristics provides a reference system promoted as a learning device (cf. C. C. West Churchman and Werner Ulrich). Ulrich and Reynolds (2020) provide an updated version of CSH.

7.2 CSH maps out any situation of interest in terms of four overall boundary judgements relating respectively to 4 sources of influence – Motivation (values), Control (power), Knowledge (trust), and Legitimacy (politics). Each source of influence can be mapped in terms of boundary questions regarding who are the stakeholders? what are the stakes? and what are the key stakeholding issues? (Exhibit 7)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Stakeholders Social Roles</th>
<th>Stakes Role-specific concerns</th>
<th>Stakeholdings Key Problems</th>
<th>The involved</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sources of motivation \ Values</td>
<td>1. Beneficiary/ client \ 2. Purpose</td>
<td>3. Measure of success \ Check on values (informing the system)</td>
<td>The involved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sources of control \ Power</td>
<td>4. Decision-maker \ 5. Resources</td>
<td>6. Decision environment \ (leverage and accountability) \ Check on power (of the system)</td>
<td>The involved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sources of knowledge \ Trust</td>
<td>7. Expert \ 8. Expertise</td>
<td>9. Guarantor \ (reliability, resonance and relevance) \ Check on trust (within system)</td>
<td>The involved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sources of legitimacy \ Politics</td>
<td>10. Witness \ 11. Emancipation</td>
<td>12. Worldview(s) \ (premises and conflict?) \ Check on fundamental meanings (justifying the system)</td>
<td>The affected</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Exhibit 7: Critical systems heuristics (CSH) reference system for benchmarking racism and racial discrimination, comprising x4 sources of influence (motivation, control, knowledge, and legitimacy) ...together providing x12 boundary questions/ judgements (adapted from Reynolds & Schwandt, 2017)

7.3 The reference system can be used as a diagnostic tool (analysing what ‘is’ the situation), as well as a design tool (mapping out what ‘ought’ to be the situation). As a diagnostic tool, four political economy CSH questions can be successively asked of any situation of interest:
(i) who gets what? (CSHq 1-2); (ii) who owns what? (CSHq 4-5); (iii) who does what? (CSHq 7-8); and (iv) who suffers what (CSHq 10-11). Hence CSH might be regarded as providing political economy approach for supporting a benchmarking framework (Reynolds and Schwandt, 2017).

7.4 The 12 CSH questions can be adapted for purposes of the JIU review, and can be asked in the ‘is’ mode – as a diagnostic tool to gauge incidences of systemic racism and systematic racial discrimination, as well as in the ‘ought’ mode – as a design tool to craft ideal features of a revised system of interest. Details of ‘unfolding’ these boundary questions in both ‘is’ and ‘ought’ modes can be found in the open access chapter (Ulrich and Reynolds, 2020) which includes two case study examples.

7.5 Exhibit 8 illustrates one relatively simple way of mapping the four sources of influence associated with CSH to questions regarding the workplace

Exhibit 8: Critical systems heuristics (CSH) acting as a reference system for addressing questions relating to four sources of influence – motivation, control, knowledge, and legitimacy

7.6 Exhibit 9 illustrates an elaboration of the benchmarking framework signalling the central CSH reference system and the peripheral 3 pairs of activities (a/b; c/d; and e/f) that might be worked through when enacting the framework.
Exhibit 9: Benchmarking framework with a central critical systems heuristics (CSH) reference system: with six suggested activities (a-f) represented as three pairs of systems thinking couplings (dualities between systemic and systematic actions). Each coupling can be associated with drivers towards (i) results-based systems change; (ii) values-driven (ongoing) developmental evaluation; and (iii) adaptive-assured governance.

7. Theory of change for benchmarking racism using critical systems heuristics (CSH)

7.1 A core feature of CSH as a reference system is the two modes of questioning deployed in any situation of interest (such as concerns of racism in UN agencies) – (i) descriptive/analytical ‘is’ mode, where CSH provides a rich picture of what is happening, and (ii) normative/ideal ‘ought’ mode where CSH questions might be formulated in terms of an aspirational set of design features for an agency.

7.2 CSH can be configured as a theory of change by translating the CSH reference system as an activity model signalling pathways of causality between the four sources of influence. Exhibit 10 illustrates one possible iteration of this model. A core feature of the ToC is the element of critique (‘ought’ vs ‘is’) at root of the monitoring and evaluation system. The criteria for M&E can be drawn from different sources aside from the CSH sources of influence – including ideas from the Global Ethics and Integrity Benchmark (GEIB) (Dubinsky, & Richter, 2008).
Exhibit 10: Theory of change based on critical systems heuristics (CSH): Activity model of a system to benchmark incidences of racism and racial discrimination in UN agencies

7.3 CSH represents a robust systems approach founded on traditions of European critical social theory (cf. Jürgen Habermas and Michel Foucault) and American pragmatism (cf. Charles Peirce, William James, John Dewey, Edward Singer and C. West Churchman).

7.4 CSH questions (Exhibit 7) provide particular value in surfacing issues of intersectionality (relational dynamics between racism and other linked discriminatory forms of marginalisation including gender, sexual orientation, class etc.). For example ‘stakeholding’ questions (CSHq3, 6, 9, and 12) for each of the sources of influence flush out issues of (i) measures of success that contrast with those of the agency (CSHq3 in motivation); (ii) accountability on issues outside of decision making in the agency (CSHq6 in control); (iii) uncertainties regarding expert guarantors of success used by the agency (CSHq9 in knowledge): and conflicts in worldview between those involved with and affected by the agency (CSHq12 in legitimacy). So whilst a benchmarking framework might focus on systemic racism and systematic racial discrimination, CSH allows for intersectional issues to be profiled and addressed.

8. Summary
The report draws together two related traditions of practice – systems thinking and developmental evaluation – in order to support the development of a benchmarking framework for identifying incidences of racism and racial discrimination generally, and more specifically in the workplace of UN agencies, as examined by the UN JIU Review. It is helpful to conceptualises the underlying Review in terms of exploring an interplay between systemic racism and systematic racial discrimination. Benchmarking racism might be regarded as a system of interest at the meso-level (system level) inviting questions in relation to manifestations of systemic racism at the macro-level (supra-system) and manifestations of systematic racial discrimination at the miro-level (sub-systems of, say, individual practices). Building on ideas of systemic triangulation with boundary critique, systemic and systematic dualities to look for in association with racism might be regarded in terms of three sets of activity couplings pivoted around core principles of addressing discrimination in the workplace; Justice, Trust, and Governance. These couplings can be understood respectively in terms
of (i) results-based transformation (planning interventions); (ii) values-driven evaluation (implementing interventions); and (iii) adaptive-assured governance.

Each coupling can be expressed in terms of being ‘developmental’. Developmental evaluation (DE) is integral, rather than external, to or separate from, an evaluand (e.g. UN agencies). In this regard, DE can be regarded as small ‘e’ evaluation contrasted with conventional big ‘E’ evaluation sometimes regarded as evaluation by ‘external audit’. DE can be facilitated by ‘experts’ but ideally requires all stakeholders to be ongoing developmental evaluators (a deeper integral form of participatory evaluation). DE involves a continual interplay between (i) ‘summative’ systemic evaluation - understanding the value dynamics of the evaluand including dignity, equity, inclusion, diversity (DEID) – and (ii) more ‘formative’ systematic evaluation – developing trust, integrity and dignity to the evaluand; that is, developing value in contrast with the more judgemental exercise associated with big ‘E’ evaluation in determining value.

Building on these two traditions, a theory of change is proposed as a means for informing a benchmarking framework for the Review. The ToC draws specifically on critical systems heuristics (CSH) as a particularly powerful reference system to explore the dynamics of systemic racism and systematic racial discrimination.

Systems thinking in practice can be thought of as a continual conversation at three levels in any workplace dynamic: (i) a metaphorical conversation between conceptual ideas of systems (maps) and the ever changing situations (territory) being addressed; (ii) a social conversation amongst workplace stakeholders (multi-agencies) regarding the situation of concern and wanting to be improved; and (iii) a further more reflective conversation regarding the ethics and politics of systems change being developed.

Based on conversations with, and correspondence and interim reports from, the Project Lead and her team, I consider the Review undertaken by JIU as providing a rich platform for developing a more purposeful systems model of benchmarking systemic racism and systematic racial discrimination in the workplace of UN agencies. Moreover there are considerable potential learning opportunities here to influence similar benchmarking endeavours outside of the UN.

Drawing on principles of systems thinking in practice (Reynolds and Howell, 2020) and particularly ideas from critical systems heuristics (Ulrich and Reynolds, 2020), some key alerts need reinforcing. Firstly, it is important that any benchmarking (system) design remains provisional and partial, hence the reason for keeping the benchmarking system responsive and purposeful rather than fixed and purposive. Secondly, any new purposeful system being recommended needs to be continually open to conversation amongst stakeholders – including of course the victims of racism and racial discrimination, but also decision makers as well as working practitioners associated with any proposed new or revised system.

References


Appendix

Extract of response to invitation

Original request from Sukai Prom Jackson (Project Lead) on 13th August 2021.
Hello Sukai. In response to request for information on how I might be of help, please see some notes below. [...] My own support might be appropriate in following two areas:

- **systems thinking** (for a ‘systems-wide’ approach) – particular reference to issues of (i) exploring feedback relationships (influences and causality) associated with institutionalised racism, (ii) surfacing and appropriately engaging multiple perspectives on incidences of racism, and (iii) reflecting on boundary judgements including intersectionality – coupling systemic aspects of racism in relation to other cultural biases, with appropriate systematic focus relating to existing ToR.

- (developmental) evaluation – by which I mean crafting a process of evaluation that goes beyond a summative external audit-review. DE with systems thinking in practice enables a process of evaluation that builds in levels of reflexivity amongst the participants (UN staff personnel from 28 linked UN institutions) and ongoing progress towards addressing issues of racism and racial discrimination as part of wider system change and organisational development.

I have before provided advice for the agency UN Women on Inclusive Systemic Evaluation for Gender equality, Environments and Marginalized voices [ISE4GEMs](#) as part of an International Advisory Group (2017-2018). My input to that group was centered on adapting a core systems thinking approach – boundary critique – underpinning my own development of systems thinking in practice (STiP) at the Open University. It is through a similar STiP lens that I would be able to contribute thoughts and ideas particularly on two aspects of advice being sought (in ToR)

- ensure solid conceptual foundation for effectiveness, impact, sustainability and coherence; ...and
- enhance appropriate methodology and measurement for validity and reliability.

I would be very happy to provide such support in liaison with JIU **Inspection and Evaluation Officer** – to advise on draft reports and through participation in workshops and meetings where you think this might be appropriate. Such support though would be limited due to other commitments.