

# How to ... approach anti-racist audience and community research

by Dr Roaa Ali



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Crafts Council Living Labs - Leather Marking workshop with  
Deborette Clarke (Photo by Gene Kavanagh)

## Introduction

### Why you need to do anti-racist research

Do you or your cultural organisation do research, and is it your intention to create an open, inclusive and equal environment for your institution, your audiences and the communities you work with?

To do so, it's important to acknowledge that harmful attitudes – such as the belief that Black, Asian and minoritised ethnic audiences are difficult to engage – are prevalent and deeply ingrained in our cultural thinking.

Damaging attitudes and misconceptions about minoritised ethnic individuals and communities can have a negative impact on how we represent and produce culture, as well as on the decision-making and policy of cultural institutions. This often leads to institutional approaches that may not always be successful and could contribute to inequalities and cause harm.

For example, the idea that audiences from minoritised ethnic backgrounds are “hard to engage” or “hard to reach” could lead to decisions about programming, ticket structure and resources for marketing and distribution that segment cultural products and audiences within a cultural hierarchy. In turn, this approach reproduces inequality of access and representation.

One factor that has contributed to the formation of these attitudes is biased research practices that start from a baseline built on misconceptions or prejudice. How this research is designed, marketed and analysed can ultimately then reproduce those prejudiced assumptions.

If your goal is to break this cycle and carry out effective audience and community research – which is anti-racist – I have drawn together some points to consider.

Interwoven throughout, you will also find some case study examples from a recent [Collaborate research project](#) between the [Crafts Council](#) and [Glasgow Caledonian University London](#) (GCU London) that was investigating the meaning and value attached to making by minoritised communities. These examples do not constitute the “only right approach” but hopefully provide a good starting point to think about some practical ways to carry out anti-racist research.



Crafts Council Living Labs - Leather Marking workshop with Debolette Clarke (Photo by Gene Kavanagh)



## Context: Why and how is this guidance useful to you?

This guidance is useful to you if you want to conduct audience research or other institutional research that actively challenges racism and unconscious bias.

As a sector, I hope we have made progress in eliminating overtly racist practices in research, but we still have work to do. We need to acknowledge that our current system of knowledge and evaluation is shaped by colonial legacies and serves, whether advertently or not, to maintain white privilege.

Take for example museums, which have historically acquired objects through colonialism and imperialism. These objects were then selected, ordered, displayed and interpreted according to a system of knowledge that was inherently invested in maintaining an imperial superiority. Today, museums are contesting this colonial legacy as they attempt to 'decolonise'.

Likewise, we must take an active approach to anti-racist research. We must take a close look at our fundamental understanding of different groups, especially those who are minoritised ethnic or marginalised. Ultimately, our goal is to promote anti-racism by acknowledging, addressing and challenging the systemic and structural inequalities that contribute to racial disparities.

### Collaborate case study: creating a shared understanding of purpose by Julia Bennett, Head of Research and Policy, Crafts Council

The Crafts Council wanted to understand more about the meaning and value attached to making by minoritised communities so that we could look further at how to tackle racism in our sector. How can we work in a more respectful way to understand more about what craft means to people and how to dismantle barriers?

To help us investigate this question, the Centre for Cultural Value awarded us Collaborate funding and we were matched with a research team from GCU London. Our research team was intersectional, but white majority. How could we surface and tackle the challenges this could present in carrying out the research?

We turned to our [Equity Advisory Council](#) (EAC), a group of minoritised and underrepresented communities who came together in 2020 to discuss how to tackle anti-Black racism and inequality in the craft sector. We invited (and paid) three EAC members to propose members to join and chair a steering group for the research. And we invited an external facilitator to host the first steering group meeting, to explore expectations, roles and ground rules.

## What needs to be in place to achieve a successful outcome?

The first step in conducting anti-racist research is understanding and being transparent about why the research is being done.

Cultural institutions conduct research to gain insights about current and potential audiences, to test new cultural products or practices and ultimately generate knowledge that can influence change in the organisation or in funding and policy bodies.

Audience research holds significant power, as the knowledge produced can be leveraged to challenge and transform attitudes that reproduce inequality. By acknowledging this power and approaching research with a commitment to anti-racism, we can ensure that our efforts are focused on creating positive change for marginalised communities.



Crafts Council Living Labs - Shibori Workshop with Shama Kun (Photo by Fariyah Chowdhury)

## What do you need to look out for on the journey?

When conducting your research, whether through surveys, feedback or interviews, it is important to ensure that a diverse range of experiences are represented and included.



Make a concerted effort to engage and recruit, among others, individuals from minoritised ethnic communities, who may have been historically excluded from cultural participation.

To do so, we need to develop honest and respectful relationships with minoritised ethnic communities and consider how best to approach and involve them in the research process.

During the research process, it is important to recognise that minoritised ethnic communities – with respect to their individual experiences and perspectives – may have hesitations or concerns about participating.

These hesitations could stem from past experiences of discrimination or could be the result of frustration due to the lack of progress towards ethnic equality.

We need to be mindful of these concerns and work to build trust and understanding to create a safe and comfortable environment for research participation.

In my own research, I have often faced this frustration at the slow pace of progress towards ethnic equality, and at times even suspicion of exploitation from minoritised ethnic participants.

My response was honesty: I outlined clearly what my research is, what I hoped the outcome would be in terms of advocacy and where the limitations would be. I explained clearly how their information would be anonymously used.

To avoid exploitation, I suggested co-authorship of final reports when participants have informed the majority of the report. At other times, when the research was more practice-based within an organisation, I allocated a budget to compensate research participants' time.



Crafts Council Living Labs - Leather Marking workshop with Deborette Clarke (Photo by Gene Kavanagh)

### **Collaborate case study: developing respectful relationships** by Julia Bennett, Head of Research and Policy, Crafts Council

For our Collaborate research fieldwork, the Crafts Council and GCU London hosted two “Living Labs”. This innovative research method involved running craft workshops with cultural organisations and their communities to test approaches to understand the meanings attached to craft.

Through the Labs, we developed a relationship with two organisations that were paid for their time and resources. We also tailored our Labs to the venue, programming and timetabling preferences of the participants. This approach meant the participants were familiar with each other, the routine and the space and allowed for findings to flow in what felt like a natural manner.

This led to the generation of a wide and deep range of data. Engagement and feedback were enthusiastic. Participants said how participating in research in this way (at the same time as working with your hands) didn't feel like a cold or sterile interview. One of the participants described the whole process as feeling “like a hug”.

We also looked at how we could offer opportunities for minoritised early career professionals to gain experience in the creative industries and strengthen the team.

We recruited and paid a Young Craft Citizen (YCC) to work on the project. YCC is a Crafts Council-hosted collective of 16–30-year-olds interested in shaping the future of craft, design and making in the UK. The YCC member contributed to the delivery of the research, including gathering data at the workshops and presenting her impressions.

You can read more about the YCC member's experience in this blog:  
<https://www.culturalvalue.org.uk/making-arts-culture-internships-count/>

## What steps should you take along the way?

Here are some practical steps that individuals and institutions can take to implement anti-racist research practices:

### 1. Be transparent and honest

It is essential to communicate the purpose of the research, its objectives and how the data will be used in a clear and truthful manner. This helps build trust with participants and ensures everyone is on the same page about the goals and outcomes of the research.

### 2. Examine your positionality

It is essential to be mindful of the researcher and institution's positionality from the beginning of the research design. We need to acknowledge that we do not all start from an equal footing due to structural inequalities that impact minoritised ethnic communities' access to resources and shape their values, aspirations and concerns.

This consideration should continue throughout the research process, from framing questions and examining any underlying assumptions to the terminology used and the overall research objective.

For example, I worked with a museum on an exhibition with representatives of a minoritised ethnic community. Museum staff were conscious of their positionality (both in terms of their ethnicity and authoritative role in the museum as permanent staff).

They acknowledged this in the process of the co-curation and agreed that how conversations are led, and how final decisions are reached should be collectively agreed rather than imposed by the museum staff.

### 3. Consult/co-curate with minoritised ethnic communities in the design

To conduct effective anti-racist research, it is essential to place research participants in the centre of the process. This can be achieved by involving minoritised ethnic representatives in the design of the research and extends to also taking their perspectives into account throughout the process of data collection, analysis and dissemination.

A more effective anti-racist research practice would be based on genuine co-curation with the minoritised ethnic communities or representatives. However, it is vital to safeguard these communities/representatives from exploitation, which could be agreed upon through remuneration or recognition.

#### Collaborate case study: finding ways to consult and co-curate by Julia Bennett, Head of Research and Policy, Crafts Council

In designing our Living Lab workshops, the Crafts Council and GCU London wanted to develop a new methodology to understand people's experiences. To try and safeguard the wellbeing of the communities we were working with, we ensured our approach complemented the existing activities of the participants in their community organisations.

We used a series of prompts and stories ('vignettes') derived from real-life research by Dr Karen Patel ([Craft Expertise project](#)) to discuss experiences of craft at the event. Participants took part in a guided-making workshop, designing and producing objects they could take home. We also passed around objects from Crafts Council's Handling Collection to explore related skills. Each of the participants received an honorarium for attending to recognise their contribution.

We also ensured the collected data would be anonymised and the themes of the findings shared back with participants. We communicated this with participants from the outset.

Over four meetings of our [steering group](#), we gradually increased levels of trust to challenge and be challenged, assisted by the contributions of our EAC members. All members of the steering group were paid for their time.



#### 4. Do not use terms such as BAME

The way that we describe minoritised ethnic communities is an important consideration when conducting anti-racist research. Recently, the use of the term BAME as an acronym has been criticised for homogenising diverse groups and potentially perpetuating marginalisation. When possible, aim to consult.

It is crucial to be mindful of language and terminology throughout the research process, from how questions are formulated to how knowledge is produced. You could use Black, Asian and minoritised ethnic.

But, what would be more transformative is to use specificity over generality when referring to diverse communities. It is important to remember that each respondent is an individual with a unique story and lived experience rather than simply a data point.

#### 5. Build relationships with minoritised ethnic communities

Having honest and respectful relationships with minoritised ethnic communities is essential in anti-racist research practice. If these relationships still need to be established, one approach could be to engage community leaders, such as religious, cultural and economic authorities and ask for their assistance in promoting the research.

Another important aspect to consider is ensuring that the voices of marginalised groups, such as non-English speaking migrants, are included in the research. This could be addressed by creating accessible translated versions of the research questions and collaborating with organisations that support these groups to help disseminate the research.

#### 6. Have an intersectional approach

It is crucial to recognise that people's identities are multi-faceted and interconnected. Intersectionality is a key concept that reminds us that the experiences of people from minoritised ethnic backgrounds cannot be reduced to just one aspect of their identity, such as their race or ethnicity.

Instead, people's experiences are shaped by many factors, including their gender, sexuality, class and ability. When conducting research, it is important to take this into account and ensure that minoritised ethnic respondents are engaged with and recruited for research on a wide range of topics, not just those related to diversity.

#### 7. Be aware of the burden of representation

Don't expect one individual to represent an entire community that is already marginalised. It is crucial for us to recognise the risks and potential harm associated with relying on a single individual to represent an entire community. While such an approach may seem expedient, it can oversimplify the experiences and perspectives of diverse individuals within the community, leading to a distorted representation. Moreover, this type of tokenism can place undue pressure on the individual who is expected to represent the community.

In my work with a museum that was co-curating an exhibition with 35 representatives of a minoritised ethnic community, it was apparent that even within one community, there are differing representations, voices and perspectives. Finding a consensus was a process that was cultivated democratically between the group members and in consultation with the wider members of the community in an event specifically designed for this purpose.

## How might you evaluate the process and outcomes?

One way of evaluating the process and outcomes of anti-racist research could be by holding a focus group with minoritised ethnic individuals who were involved in the research, or who might be impacted by the outcome of the research, after its conclusion.

The focus group would be a space for as an honest open discussion on the research design, methods and analysis to identify both successes and shortcomings and commitment to address those in future practice.

Another vital step in evaluating the research process and its outcome is to take time to examine the organisation's own responsibility in addressing the findings of the research. This can be achieved by working proactively to advocate for change within the organisation itself and with funders and policy bodies.



### Collaborate case study: advocating for change by Julia Bennett, Head of Research and Policy, Crafts Council

Beginning with a short study is a useful and important first step. It can act as a springboard for future activity that can bring about systematic change.

In our case, we're in discussion with Craft UK, a network of craft organisations, about the social impact of their work and how grassroots delivery can better connect with academia and research.

We've also convened a wider round table with higher education institutions to explore further research. We are actively looking into the potential for the method to be used with audiences in other creative industries.

Read our findings from our Collaborate project: [Disrupting the craft canon](#)

Crafts Council  
Living Labs -  
Shibori Workshop  
with Shama Kun  
(Photo by Fariyah  
Chowdhury)

## Final thoughts

It goes without saying that anti-racism should not be a responsibility only entrusted to designated individuals in an organisation, such as research officer, diversity officer or community and audience engagement officer. It should be an organic practice that runs throughout the organisation, informed by guidelines set by the organisation's leadership as much as by the daily practices of all staff and guided by the communities to which the organisation serves and is ultimately accountable.

It is vital to consider all elements of the research practice through the prism of anti-racism from the outset of the research design through to the dissemination and analysis. It is important to note that these are all influenced by power dynamics, often unequal, between the researcher and researched, particularly when the researched are from minoritised ethnic backgrounds.

## Reflective questions

Here are some reflective questions to consider when undertaking a research project that aims to incorporate anti-racist approaches:

- Have I interrogated my own positionality and potential biases? Am I aware of the ways in which my own experiences and perspectives might influence the research process and outcomes?
- How have I engaged with the community being researched? Have I taken steps to ensure the community is included and represented throughout the research process?
- Have I critically examined the terminology and language used in the research questions and analysis? Have I avoided using homogenising terms that erase the diversity of the community being researched?
- How have I considered the intersectionality of the issues being researched? Have I considered how race intersects with other factors such as gender, class, sexuality and ability?
- What will I do with the relationships I cultivated throughout the research process and what will I do about the research findings when it is all done and dusted?

## Glossary

### Anti-racist research

An approach to conducting research that aims to actively challenge and dismantle racism as well as other forms of systemic oppression. It involves examining and analysing how racism operates in various socio-economic and political systems and developing strategies to promote equity and justice for marginalised communities.

### Colonial legacy

The impact that colonialism has left on a colonised country or region, as well as the impact it left on the colonising society, often long after colonisation was forced to end. Some residues of colonialism can manifest in institutionalised discrimination, having biased perceptions and bias towards previously colonised people, and economic and cultural inequalities.

### Minoritised ethnic and BAME

BAME is an acronym that is used to refer to Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic. The term has been criticised for homogenising diverse ethnic groups and erases their unique identities and experiences. By grouping together various ethnicities under a single label, the term BAME overlooks important distinctions and nuances within different communities. In this guide, the term 'Black, Asian and minoritised ethnic' is used as the collective term to refer to those groups, which was shorthand to 'minoritised ethnic' for the purpose of this guide.

### Intersectionality

How social identities such as race, gender, sexuality, class and ability are interconnected and how they can intersect to create unique experiences of privilege and oppression. The concept highlights how individuals can simultaneously experience multiple forms of discrimination and oppression that intersect and which cannot be addressed separately.

### White privilege

A term that describes the advantages afforded to white people by systemic racial injustice. The term helps us understand how whiteness confers privilege and how others are systematically denied those same rights. The concept of white privilege can spark individual self-reflection and motivate individual political action.

## Further reading and resources

### Ali, R. (2020), *The Conversation*

[Why you don't see many black and ethnic minority faces in cultural spaces – and what happens if you call out the system](#)

### CIJ (no date), *Centre for Intersectional Justice*

[What is intersectionality](#)

### Dei, G.J.S. (2005)

[‘Critical Issues in Anti-racist Research Methodologies: AN INTRODUCTION’](#)  
Counterpoints, 252, pp. 1–27.

### Gopal, P. (2021)

[‘On Decolonisation and the University’, \*Textual Practice\*](#)  
35(6), pp. 873–899. Available at:

### Malik, S. et al. (no date)

[BAME: A report on the use of the term and responses to it. \*Centre for Media Diversity\*](#)

### Tyson, K. et al. (2021), *The Conversation*

[White privilege: what it is, what it means and why understanding it matters](#)



## About the contributor

**Dr Roaa Ali** is a Lecturer in Creative and Cultural Industries at the University of Manchester, UK. Roaa is an interdisciplinary researcher focusing on race and diversity in the Creative and Cultural Industries (CCIs).

She writes extensively on issues of diversity, anti-racism, inequality, and the politics of cultural production in the cultural sector. She has researched a number of cultural organisations and worked with [The Audience Agency](#) to explore anti-racist thinking and institutional approaches.

Her most recent publications include '[The trouble with diversity: the cultural sector and ethnic inequality](#)' (Cultural Sociology) and a monograph titled *Contemporary Arab American Drama: Cultural politics of Otherness* (forthcoming with Routledge).

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### Have you undertaken a research project that centres anti-racist approach and practice? What did you learn?

Share your reflections and learning with us at [ccv@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:ccv@leeds.ac.uk) and we'll feed this into future versions of this "How to..." guide. Or let us know if you'd like to submit a case study or contribute to a podcast or webinar on this theme.

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