

SWU Social Workers Union Blog Series

Dogwhistles

Part 1: Dog whistles - a socially destructive form of discrimination

Understanding how dog whistles work, how they affect vulnerable and marginalised communities, and how to diffuse them are important tools for social workers.

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You may or may not be familiar with the term “dog whistle” in a political context, but you most certainly have seen these coded messages in both UK and international media. Here are some dog whistle phrases you may have encountered that aim antagonistic messages at marginalised groups: “race realism,” “benefit scroungers”, “gay agenda”, “trans ideology”, “[gold-plating human rights and equalities legislation](#)”, and “[invasion on our southern coast](#)”.

The [political meaning of “dog whistle”](#) was added to the Merriam-Webster dictionary in 2017 and has been defined as “an expression or statement that has a secondary meaning intended to be understood only by a particular group of people.”

Dog whistles cause real and lasting harm. Recognising and challenging discrimination is a key pillar of social work and this blog series aims to give social work professionals the tools to detect and decipher these coded messages. In Parts 2 - 4 of this blog series, people with lived experience will discuss the harm that this type of discrimination and stoking of prejudice has caused to individuals and communities.

How do political dog whistles work?

Dog whistles are a calculated tactic used to manipulate and stoke prejudice in others. Dog whistles are often deployed with the aim to spread and amplify racism, xenophobia, antisemitism, Islamophobia, homophobia, transphobia, aporophobia, or other antagonistic attitudes towards marginalised groups. Plausible deniability and reliance on “outgroups” not understanding the coded message aimed at the “ingroup” are key components for all dog whistles.

Dog whistles work in two ways: The first type of dog whistle communicates specific views in a coded fashion to a subset of an audience - for example, a politician could use this type of dog whistle to communicate certain views with the intent to avoid alienating potential supporters who do not share these views. Someone could also use this type of dog whistle in a social media post to convey discriminatory views while trying to avoid the appearance of violating social media platform rules that prohibit [hateful conduct](#) and [hate speech](#).

Deb Solomon shares the impact that these dog whistles can have on neurodivergent people growing up and in the workplace in Part 3 of this blog series. In Part 4, **jane fae** also discusses common transphobic and anti-LGBTQIA+ dog whistles and how to keep up with the evolving language.

The second type of dog whistle aims to activate associations and stoke pre-existing attitudes without the audience’s awareness. **Narinder Sidhu** explores a very contemporary example in Part 2 which takes a more in depth look at racist dog whistles.

When the silent part is said out loud, it’s just a whistle

That all being said, there is a straightforward way to counter dog whistles.

Legal scholar Professor **Ian Haney-López** says, “Dog whistles only work as long as most people don’t know about them.” Dog whistles are diffused when all messages contained in the statement are made explicit because then it’s not a dog whistle anymore; it’s a whistle that everyone can hear.

Political scientist Professor **Tali Mendelberg** wrote, “In the age of equality, politicians cannot prime race with impunity due to a norm of racial equality that prohibits racist speech.” In the UK this “norm of equality” can also be applied - at varying levels - to other characteristics protected by the Equality Act 2010.

The “norm of equality” is one of the main reasons that dog whistles are used to communicate these messages; the coded message part of the statement could result in widespread social disapproval if it was explicitly stated. If explicitly stated, the discriminatory message could have other repercussions including exclusion from a social media platform for violating terms of service or being considered a criminal offence.

People *do* generally want to avoid perpetuating discrimination like racism or ableism and this is reflected in both UK government legislation and the ongoing moderation of large-scale social media platforms. So in general, when there is a suggestion that a statement might be discriminatory, people will reflect on the statement and “self-monitor” to block antagonistic attitudes from influencing their thoughts on the subject.

Dog whistles work because prejudices exist

Unfortunately, this diffusion tactic only works with accepted norms of equality. If a form of discrimination does not violate an accepted norm of equality - that is to say, if prejudice is harboured towards the group(s) of people alluded to by the dog whistle - then that audience will not engage in “self-monitoring”. In this case the dog whistle reaches its target “ingroup” of the audience who either don't find the message problematic or who agree with it to some degree.

The paper [Immigration in the Brexit campaign: Protean dogwhistles and political manipulation](#) gives an example of this with the topic of immigration: “In short, for different portions of the audience, immigration will function differently: for some it may not be a dogwhistle at all. For others, it may be a dogwhistle about any or all of the following: foreigners, Eastern Europeans, refugees, Muslims, Syrians, or dark-skinned people.”

Dog whistles are frequently used on social media platforms as a way for people who share certain prejudices to connect and reach out to wider audiences. The paper [Covert Hate Speech: White Nationalists and Dog Whistle Communication on Twitter](#) explains how Twitter has been used as a channel to convey white supremacist ideas to a broader audience and signal belonging among far-right communities while staying under the radar of detection.

In his article [Campaign 2016 Vocabulary Lesson: 'Strategic Racism'](#), Professor Haney-López describes how dog whistling goes beyond the personal prejudices of individuals - even if they are a powerful politician - and how it threatens nations:

“It's socially destructive, intentionally firing the ugliest passions and pitting people against each other. It undermines democracy, manipulating voters through appeals to their worst instincts while distorting the real issues of the day. It's an economic catastrophe, convincing working people to fear other vulnerable populations and instead to cast their lot with the plutocrats. It shatters the 'we,' destroying our commitment to the community and public and instead fostering frightened isolation and anomie.”

Leave no one behind in the fight for social justice

The Social Workers Union (SWU) remains [committed to pursuing the concept of social justice](#) through challenging oppression, respecting diversity, advocating for access to and equal distribution of resources, challenging unjust policies and practices and ultimately exercising our duty both collectively and individually to challenge social conditions that contribute to oppression, social exclusion, stigma, or subjugation and to work towards a more inclusive society.

SWU shares a social work value base with the British Association of Social Workers (BASW) - as expressed in the [BASW Code of Ethics and Values](#) - with a commitment to act ethically and to protect and promote the rights of people who need to or who access social work services.

SWU and BASW members who have experienced discrimination at work and are in need of employment advice can make an appointment to speak to a duty worker from the [Advice and Representation team](#) to begin with, by contacting aras@basw.co.uk or calling 0121 622 8413.

You may also be interested in reading the SWU blog [“Intersectionality is a valuable tool for Social Work Practice”](#) which is a precursor to this series.

Part 2: Dog whistles at large - racism

Social Workers must be vigilant to dog whistles.

Narinder Sidhu is a Professional Officer for BASW Cymru and a registered Social Worker who has worked in a range of clinical settings as a Forensic Social Worker and Mental Health Practitioner within the Child & Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). She is also a specialist lecturer and co-chairs the BASW UK & SWU LGBTQIA+ Action Group. Her areas of expertise include forensic social work, LGBTQIA+, intersectionality, domestic abuse, forced marriage, honour-based violence, and female genital mutilation.

Thankfully, nowadays it is not considered acceptable for individuals to make hateful statements - for example, statements that are racist, sexist, or xenophobic. This means that politicians or people who want to make such statements need to use coded language, and that's when "dog whistles" are used.

I believe that dog whistles have huge implications for democratic politics and with social work being a politicised profession it is important that we are aware and fully understand the more covert speech acts around us.

Racial dog whistles

Racial dog whistles are often used when people want to speak about race specifically to their target audience but cannot deliver their intended antagonistic message directly. The coded messages in these dog whistles are used to reinforce racist ideology and to inflame racial prejudice.

Ian Haney-López who is the Chief Justice Earl Warren Professor of Public Law at the University of California, Berkeley explains that dog whistling "[simply means speaking in code to a target audience.](#)"

According to Haney-López, people using racial dog whistles utilise these three key tactics:

1. The individual forces race into the discussion through "thinly veiled" racist remarks against people of colour.
2. The individual will make sure to not directly reference any one racial or ethnic group so they cannot be accused of direct racism.
3. The individual will shame any critics who try to call them out on the racist comments.

Dog whistles during pandemics

Dehumanising rhetoric around disease is not a new phenomenon. I reflected that the UK has an ugly dog whistle history around healthcare and crises.

Let's think about the 1980s AIDS Crisis. During the height of the AIDS pandemic, people in power used homophobic slurs to ignore the increasing death tolls in the LGBTQ+ community. It was widely called the "gay plague" and mistakenly believed that HIV could be transmitted by any kind of proximity. All sectors of society stigmatised the gay community during this time and many AIDS patients died in isolation. It was not until I reached adulthood that I was able to process these significant events of my childhood through a lens of societal and systematic discrimination.

Think about what you have heard about the origins of the COVID-19 pandemic. The widespread apportioning of blame for the disease on China caused racial abuse of people of East and South East Asian (ESEA) heritage to dramatically increase in the UK and western world during the pandemic. A [2020 Ipsos Mori poll](#) found that 1 in 7 people in the UK intentionally avoid people of Chinese origin or appearance.

UK police data suggests a [300% rise in hate crimes](#) towards people of ESEA heritage in the first quarter of 2020 compared with the same period in 2018 and 2019. According to the UK-based advocacy group End Violence and Racism Against ESEA Communities (EVR), this trend continues to this day.

Misinformation is its own form of virus, spreading fear and hate. Stigma spread by misinformation can result in an increase of hate crimes and an increase of preventable morbidity rates for marginalised communities.

The dog whistles of Brexit

[Politicians use dog whistles](#) in an attempt to manipulate people into making decisions they wouldn't normally be morally comfortable with. A contemporary example of a xenophobic and racist dog whistle is the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) anti-migrant poster which was unveiled by its leader Nigel Farage in 2016.



This poster is not about immigration; it is about race. Notably, the white box on the bottom right of the image covers the one white face in the crowd, which many have speculated was a deliberate design choice. This poster uses coded messages used to reinforce racist ideas that the UK's societal and economic problems are caused by an influx of undeserving, lazy, and violent people of colour.

This xenophobic messaging suggests that non-whiteness and immigration (including refugees) are the main cause for the UK to be at "breaking point" - however, it avoids being specific about what exactly is breaking. The vagueness suggests that non-whiteness is to blame for any crises including the socioeconomic, health, security, educational, employment, housing, criminal justice, welfare (I could go on) crisis the UK is facing. It sends a strong message that the simple removal of such people will make Britain great again with the implication that a white Britain would be better off.

In an even more recent example from 2019, Prime Minister Boris Johnson said, “I’ll make Britain great again!” Johnson promised in his first speech to Parliament as Prime Minister that Brexit would make Britain the greatest place on earth. This echoed Donald Trump’s campaign slogan “Make America Great Again” [which is a well-known racial dog whistle](#) used to gain favour with white voters. Johnson was determined to deliver on Brexit and so many backed him and voted for Brexit, despite the thinly veiled attempts of the Brexit campaign to inflame and embolden prejudice.

Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022

Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller people face not only [high levels of prejudice and discrimination](#), but an increasingly hostile legal environment.

In 2021 the British Association of Social Workers, Social Workers Union, Gypsy, Roma and Traveller Social Work Association and several partner organisations [co-signed a letter](#) to the Home Secretary, Priti Patel, opposing inhumane and unlawful draft guidance published in support of the proposed Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Bill. It is unjust for a person or group of people to be targeted because they are judged (on unclear criteria) to be likely to commit a criminal offence and this attempt at predicting criminality sets a worrying precedent.

The Conservative party’s bill became the [Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022](#) and effectively criminalises the Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller traditional way of life by introducing fines and prison sentences for unauthorised encampments, along with the confiscation of people’s vehicles and homes.

I agree with Jo Richardson, Professor of Housing and Social Inclusion when she refers to the Gypsies and Travellers “clampdown” as being [less dog whistle and more political fog-horn](#). Notably, dog whistles have been used in UK politics [by other parties too](#) and not just the Conservatives.

When you know, you know - and now you know

Some of these examples overtly demonstrate Haney-López’s thinking when he defines the dog-whistle as a *“strategic manipulation of racial ideas for the pursuit of power and material wealth.”* Dog whistles trade in racist ideas but they explicitly avoid naming race directly; they invoke negative racial stereotypes with the hope that the audience will not make a conscious connection of the underlying inflammatory rhetoric.

The power of dog whistles stems from the plausible deniability that they contain coded messages. **Identifying and calling dog whistles out means they lose their power.** Therefore, it’s important to call out the coded messages when you see them.

Questioning *“Is there something racist going on here?”* is enough to inform you that it is likely a dog whistle.

Social Workers challenge social injustice and promote human rights so must be able to clearly understand the various ways in which racism and xenophobia can manifest. We must also be vigilant about how people in power can leverage their influence to create and promote the adoption of legislation and social policy which have no regard for human rights, equality, and inclusion.

If we consider the so called “border crisis” in the UK, what are the political lies you are told and what racial dog whistles have you missed?

Part 3: Dog whistles at work - neurodiversity

Dog whistles can be used on a smaller scale such as within workplace teams.

Deb Solomon is a practicing social worker, Chair of the BASW Neurodivergent Social Workers SIG, and Co-Chair of the BASW Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Advisory Group. SWU has invited her to share her experiences with dog whistles in the workplace as part of this blog series.

Thank you SWU for the invitation to write this blog. It has been a cause for reflection, and I realise that I have been influenced by the “dog whistles” I have encountered in society throughout my life. One such example is a dismissive sentiment I have heard expressed many times: “ADHD is just an excuse for bad behaviour.” This particular dog whistle shows a lack of understanding of ADHD and goes so far as to suggest that it is not a real medical condition - which is shocking and ableist.

I was diagnosed with [ADHD](#) in 2020 and, as a 43 year old woman, I was totally surprised at this diagnosis. On reflection, I had always been very well behaved as a child, other than gazing out the window and not focusing in class.

My research following my diagnosis of course showed me a more accurate picture of ADHD and Neurodiversity in general - one that was not in sync with the dog whistles I had been hearing. However, the uneducated and pointed comments about ADHD and Neurodiversity that I’ve heard follow me. I have been told repeatedly how “everyone is a bit ADHD” and how having better organisation and “better sleep hygiene” will fix me.

The impact that these comments have is that they prompt me to mask. To fit in. Which, for a long time, meant that I was working three to four extra hours every day to try and keep up with the work because I found it difficult to focus in a busy noisy office. If I took myself off to work somewhere quiet I would be at risk of not being a “team player” so I tried my best. I would be easily distracted by the noise, the harsh lighting, the constant interruptions and would have to catch up in the evening.

I did ask for support when my case load was particularly high and I knew I was struggling. However, my struggles were attributed to my diagnosis and not the very high challenging caseload. When I said I felt stressed, instead of being offered support I was told, “Well, you know what you can be like.” That made me feel belittled, unheard and alone.

The impact of these dog whistles used within my workplace is that I felt that if I asked for any support I was admitting an inability to do my job. This is not on.

It is essential for employers to create a psychologically safe workspace in order to get the best out of their workforce. I know how I work and what strengths I bring.

Watch the [“Stepping stones towards decent working conditions” webinar video](#) - organised by the [SWU Campaign Fund](#) - to hear more about how Deb took action after finding that life trying to “fit in” at work was leading to exhaustion, burnout, and mental health issues.

Part 4: Dog whistles in context - transphobia

Listen to what communities affected by dog whistles are saying.

jane fae is chair of [Trans Media Watch](#) and a director at [TransActual UK](#). SWU has invited her to share her knowledge and perspective of the ongoing issue of transphobic dog whistles in the UK as part of this blog series to educate social workers.

A banana is just a banana, until it isn't

As a quote often attributed to Freud goes, "Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar". Likewise, a banana. On occasion, a dislike of spicy food denotes nothing more sinister than a sensitive - English - taste palate. 88 is no more than a bingo call: "two fat ladies", although we don't call it that anymore.

All fine and good. Except: tossing a banana onto the pitch in front of a black footballer is basic racism. Ditto with the spicy food thing, which is a condition set by some landlords to exclude Asian tenants. As for 88, tread carefully if you see it in someone's Twitter handle as 8 is often code for H, the 8th letter of the alphabet. So 88 can stand in for HH - or, in some circles, "Heil Hitler".

If you weren't aware of such usage before - and these are just the tip of the iceberg - welcome to the world of the toxic dog whistle. It's shorthand for a word, a phrase or some part of a communication that sounds innocuous to most people, but is also intended to convey something altogether nastier to a specific subset. It can be rallying cry to those who share certain views or a bullying tactic enabling one group to have a go at another "in plain sight". It's a double whammy, as the bully gets to have a go and when called out can just shrug their shoulders and feign innocence.

LGBTQIA+ dog whistles

In respect of trans folk, and often the wider LGBTQIA+ community, common dog whistles sometimes include:

- "*Family values*" is a broad-spectrum dog whistle that has been used to signal opposition to liberalism, feminism, comprehensive sex education, atheism, homosexuality, trans people, same-sex marriage, and divorce with the implication that these are immoral and threaten the fabric of society. In the specific context of anti-trans dog whistles, "family values" is currently being used to stoke moral panic over the alleged existence of a predatory ["gender ideology"](#).
- "*Adult human female*" is part of the anti-trans slogan "woman = adult human female". The implication here is that everyone's gender is immutably determined by the sex they are assigned at birth and therefore trans identities are not valid.
- "*Trans-identified*" is a term that denies the existence of trans people by implying that people cannot self-determine their own gender and that gender is determined by the sex that someone is assigned at birth. It is used in discourse to misgender people - for example, calling a trans woman a "trans-identified male" (TIM) or a trans man a "trans-identified female" (TIF).
- "*41%*" refers to a grim statistic from the 2011 US [National Transgender Discrimination Survey](#) (in which a staggering 41% of 6,450 respondents said they had attempted suicide at some point in their lives, compared to 1.6% of the US population) and is a covert dig at and in some cases an expression of jubilation at suicidality in the trans community.

- “Globalism” / “big pharma” are used as anti-trans dog whistles to imply that the trans community is a powerful, monolithic and international cabal operating in the shadows. These awful two-for-one dog whistles echo the antisemitism of “international finance” and historic anti-Jewish slurs, and are an example of [antisemitism manifesting in anti-trans rhetoric](#).

Sometimes - and that, of course, is the rub. The entire point of dog whistles is that they cannot be heard by humans, or in this case everyone who is not the intended audience of their coded message, and that they travel underneath the radar. In part, dog whistles are a response to more sophisticated moderation on social media platforms, which make outright insults and expression of prejudices a banning offence. They are code and allusion.

But sometimes... well, sometimes that cigar really is a cigar. When I was a lot younger, a “faggot” was a meat patty that my mother cooked from Sunday lunch leftovers on Mondays; and the most common use of “tranny” was in respect of a van (transit van) or radio (transistor radio).

Times change. Terms change. Usage changes.

Keeping up with the evolving language

So how can you tell when someone is dog whistling transphobia?

Look at their audience. If they are mostly addressing an anti-trans audience, there is a good chance they are. Also, keep an eye out for people who claim to be “engaging in debate”, and keep “accidentally” using dog whistles.

Listen to what trans people are saying. Because who better than the target of abuse to tell you that they are being abused?

It won't always be clear cut. But 9 times out of 10, it will be. There is a pattern. Other less coded commentary makes motives clear.

So, when you see it, call it out. And when others call out something as a dog whistle, do some research. Do not fall for the innocent shrug and the puppy dog eyes!

You may also be interested in reading our recent [quest blog by TransActual on supporting transgender young people](#), the [June 2022 Pride month episode of the BASW “Let’s Talk Social Work” podcast](#) examining the issue of anti-trans discrimination and conversion therapy, and the [BASW Position Statement on Social Work with Transgender People](#).

