



Discrimination

The dictionary describes discrimination as "*the unjust or prejudicial treatment of different categories of people, especially on the grounds of race, age, or sex.*"

The dictionary definition could also include age, disability, gender reassignment, race, religion or belief, sex, sexual orientation, marriage and civil partnership, and pregnancy and maternity.

Historically in 1960's Britain, it would not have been unusual to see signs or adverts offering accommodation with the strapline '*No Blacks, Irish or Dogs.*'

Through the years, successive UK governments brought in legislation outlawing discrimination aimed at the groups mentioned above.

One such piece of law is the [2010 Equality Act](#) which lists nine protected characteristics. These are:

1. Age
2. Disability
3. Gender reassignment
4. Marriage and civil partnership
5. Pregnancy or maternity
6. Race
7. Religion or belief
8. Sex
9. Sexual orientation



Did you know that this resource is available in the Counselling Study Resource with links to related topics for further reading? [Read it online.](#)

Any organisation found guilty of discriminating against someone who has one or more of these **Protected Characteristics** can expect a fine.

Even with legislation and changing social attitudes, sadly discrimination still exists. Discrimination usually falls into two distinct categories.

- **Overt discrimination**
- **Covert discrimination**

Overt discrimination

Overt discrimination includes any direct or 'overt' act that aims to give unequal treatment to an individual or group, based on their 'difference.'

For example:

- Denying a job or access to services such as shop or counselling services because of someone's age, gender, sexuality, skin colour, ethnicity, or nationality

This form of discrimination is usually an intentional form of discrimination, with the perpetrator having full knowledge of his/her actions and includes:

- Blatant or direct acts of discrimination
- Sexual or verbal assaults on female employees to deny them equal rights at the workplace
- Hate crimes, in which individuals of a certain race or religion are physically assaulted
- Acts of vandalism, where religious sites or personal property belonging to particular groups, are damaged or defaced
- Blatantly giving unequal treatment to an individual or group, based on their age, gender, sexuality, skin colour, ethnicity, nationality or sexuality

A change in societal attitudes and legislation means overt discrimination has drastically declined in recent years, though it still happens.

Covert discrimination

Covert discrimination is harder to detect and can be either intentional or unintentional. Such behaviour is clearly visible but rarely noticed, because it adheres to accepted social norms.

For example:

- A group of middle-aged employees who struggle to get a promotion even though they are well qualified; however, plausible reasons are given for the lack of advancement.

Areas of intentional covert discrimination include:

- A university making subtle changes in their admission criteria to exclude some groups from admission. These changes seem rational, or ethnically neutral, thus preventing any outrage.
- Tokenism, taking on diverse employees purely to fill a quota or to 'virtue signal.'
- Not employing individuals who have 'foreign-sounding names' even if they have relevant qualifications or experience.

Areas of non-intentional covert discrimination include:

- Presuming clients' issues are due to their diversity. For example, 'He is depressed because he is gay.'
- Treating clients like victims because you presume they have faced discrimination.

Discrimination in any form will impact on clients and their ability to form a therapeutic relationship. It is worth considering that one's behaviour need not always be abusive or derogatory for it to be considered prejudicial.

Resource

Equalityhumanrights.com. (2020). *Equality Act FAQs | Equality and Human Rights Commission*. [online] Available at: <https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/equality-act/equality-act-faqs> [Accessed 20 Jan. 2020].