Journal of Community & Applied Social Psychology
J. Community Appl. Soc. Psychol., **15**: 425–431 (2005)
Published online in Wiley InterScience (www.interscience.wiley.com). **DOI**: 10.1002/casp.840

Editorial

Towards a Critical Social Psychology of Racism: Points of Disruption

One of the questions that the papers here as a whole invite is *what is or what should be the point of a critical social psychology of racism?* What questions should such an approach propose? What this special issue contributes to the study of racism is a focus on disruption, resistance and transformative practices. While social psychology has often preferred approaches that account for the expression of racism (whether this is located in individual minds, social institutions or cultural practices) and/or the psychological consequences of racism (on attitudes, stereotypes, representations, identities and self-esteem),[1] we have chosen empirical projects and theoretical discussions that focus on the moments in which racist and racialising practices are made visible, unsettled and so disrupted. This invites analysis into the opportunities for transgressing racialised networks of power, the social psychological dynamics of resistance and so the possibilities for challenging racism and social change. Hence what is valuable about these papers is that they begin a discussion of how we may find ways to contest and so undermine racism—and what subject positions there are available in different social contexts for this endeavour.[2]

This special issue as a whole makes a very significant argument: that a critical social psychology of racism (and 'whiteness'[3]) needs to consider the social and psychological possibilities and conditions for *disrupting* racialising practices and claims to privilege, belonging and knowing. This argument is worked out in the papers through a series of implicit questions:

— How should we understand racism: both in day-to-day and institutionalised environments?

Contract/grant sponser: LSE Department of Sociology and LSE Teaching and Learning Centre.

[1]As Leach (2002) has pointed out, much classical social psychology views racist activity as 'a function of weak personality, biased perception or ethnocentric categorization . . . .[ultimately locating] prejudice in the individuated person rather than in societal practices and institutions' (p. 440).

[2]This is not to propose that the dynamics of racism and strategies of disruption are in any way complete, uniform or universal across culture and history. We regret that the range of contexts discussed in the special issue is not broader in terms of illustrating how 'race', racism and resistance are always produced in specific cultural and historical locations. Three of the five papers here interrogate the associated colonial contexts of Aotearoa/New Zealand and Australia. These were chosen as they speak to the issues that we see as crucial in the analysis of racism: 'whiteness', subjectivity, embodiment and resistance.

[3]Just as is now common practice with the term 'race', we have chosen to disrupt and de-essentialise readings of 'whiteness' using parentheses.

 Accepted 31 August 2005

— How do our own subjectivities shape the ways in which we research racism and assert 'anti-racist' objectives?
— Should we study 'whiteness'? Or could this simply re-centre 'whiteness' as an insidious basis of social norms, ideals and unspoken claims to historical privilege?
— In what ways is racism exposed, critiqued and disrupted in 'doing' identity—in contestory forms of discourse and oppositional subject-positionings?

A critical question is *how should we understand racism?* Given the increased recognition that race and racialised difference is historically and ideologically (re)produced, albeit differently in specific contexts as is evident in the papers that follow, how do we describe the very 'real' consequences of the representations and practices that 'race' certain bodies, positions, spaces and discourses, and privilege others in ways that normalise 'whiteness' and coerce alternative perspectives into one particular way of knowing. Recognising that 'race' and difference are *constructed*, performatively *produced* and *embodied* in particular ways that protect particular investments, particular identities and particular relations of privilege and oppression, does not mean that we can now simply deconstruct 'race'. Nor does this mean we can now move into relationships, locations, subjectivities and practices that are somehow 'above and beyond' the significance and *materiality* of 'race' and racism across local and global contexts (Omi, 2001; Durrheim and Dixon, 2005), even though this would be a laudable aim of an antiracist agenda. Racism cannot be so easily dismissed, as the paper '*Against the notion of a new racism*' by Colin Leach discusses. Leach offers a detailed history of the ways in which racism has been and is theorised in the social sciences and is played out in a range of contexts (focussing mainly on America, Australia and Western Europe). He warns against the dangers of faulty conceptualizations of racism, echoing Miles (1989) who has stated 'if the analysis is wrong, then it is likely that the political strategy will not achieve the intended objectives' (p. 5). Leach argues that we need to be very cautious of claims to so-called 'new' forms of cultural racism, offers a historical analysis of the intersection of biologising accounts of racism and narratives that work up claims to essential cultural differences and concludes that there are in fact significant historical continuities in the operations of racism. This disrupts current assumptions about 'new racism' and encourages us to problematise the *making of 'race' and racism* in academia and the role we all play in developing and contesting concepts and theories that maintain the significance of 'race' in our academic and everyday understandings of social relations and subjectivities.

Proposals of how Social Psychology should study racism are also given in the paper *Studying talk and embodied practices: Towards a psychology of materiality of 'race relations'* by Kevin Durrheim and John Dixon. After providing valuable critiques of both the 'impoverished realism' of attitudinal studies and the 'selective anti-realism' of discursive approaches to racism, these authors argue that an adequate social psychology of racism must focus on the embodied and located everyday practices (and talk about such) which bring 'race' into being and make it appear 'real'. In examining both people's movements on a desegregated beach in South Africa and interviews with black and white beach-goers, Durrheim and Dixon demonstrate how particular spaces provoke and impede certain ways of 'doing race' and maintaining the significance of racialised difference in the context of post-apartheid South Africa. Echoing Leach (this issue), this again points to the ways in which the lived experience of racism is surprisingly resistant to change. Essentially their project is to demand a proper conceptualisation of racism, one that recognises both it tenacity and its flexibility, and highlights the very material reality of racism in everyday

practices. This encourages us to think about the ways in which the different analytic tools we use to research racism may in some ways actually obscure (and so protect) the very processes that we claim we are attempting to dismantle.

This brings us to the thorny question of *how our own subjectivities shape the ways in which we research racism and assert anti-racist objectives* and this, in turn, highlights our (dis)location in different racialising discourses and practices of privilege and oppression—as discussed by Damien Riggs and Martha Augoustinos in their paper on *'The Psychic Life of Colonial Power: Racialised Subjectivities, Bodies and Methods'*. By focussing on the question of subjectification, these authors call attention to whether 'whiteness' might be torn free of historical investments of power and/or dispossession. Their answer is an unambiguous no: the taking on of a position within 'whiteness' means to assume a variety of historical privileges and prerogatives endowed by legacies of racism. Indeed though describing themselves as non-indigenous Australians they recognise the necessary difficulty of exposing and challenging collective claims to identity, belonging and privilege that they themselves are invested in. This is an extremely insightful and refreshing account of the tensions and possibilities for doing and living a critical social psychology of anti-racism for those of us privileged by our position, heritage and, fundamentally, skin. Key here is their warning that adopting the stance of the 'critical' researcher may itself function as a disavowal of how one profits from particular distributions and arrangements of racialised power. Once again, their paper documents the embodied and materialised nature of racism and demands a thorough problematising of the operation of subjectivity and power at the level of the psyche. Resisting individualising and psychologising versions of racism, here the psyche is conceptualised as a collective practice, and their research reveals how racialised power relations are evident in collective memories and founded on a collective disavowal of colonial violence. Through a discussion of white non-indigenous Australian identities and claims to belonging and difference, Riggs and Augoustinos demonstrate that that racism is foundational to white subjectivities and hence any functional analysis of racism should disrupt the normativity and symbolic violence of 'whiteness.' This demands an analysis of how white bodies, identities and relationships are 'raced' in ways that are normally only seen and *felt* from the position the racialised other.

All of the papers in the special issue, to varying degrees, implicitly ask whether we *should study 'whiteness'? Or could this simply re-centre 'whiteness' as an insidious basis of social norms, ideals and claims to historical privilege,* particularly in post-imperial Western settings, where 'whiteness' is often evoked as—even if in an unspoken way—as a common denominator for a series of moral values, of culture, achievement, 'civilization', moral conduct, reliability and so forth? How can we problematise its role in the politics of racialised difference in specific post-colonising locations without reaffirming its dominance and privilege? While these discussions are well-rehearsed in the field of critical race and cultural studies, it is relatively recently that Social Psychological theorising and research has recognised how 'whiteness' itself generates racism, racialised identities and resistance to anti-racist politics. There is wisdom in advocating caution against 'studies of whiteness' as these may constitute either the expression of guilt and anxiety or the desire to capture and maintain racialised difference (and so white privilege). A refusal to mainstream 'other' perspectives, particularly Indigenous knowledges, leads all too easily into a colonisation of research into racism (Ahmed, 2004; Green & Sonn, 2005), and a subsequent unwillingness to recognise one's own investment—particularly as researchers who share in the benefits of 'whiteness'—in the ongoing (re)production of relations of racism. The

outcome of such an approach may ultimately be a reluctance to expose and disrupt the ways in which white identities and practices of privilege produce and defend racialised inequalities and oppression (Riggs & Augoustinos, 2004; Thompson, 2003). One of the ways in which racism works is to fix the direction of the gaze onto the racialised other: it is the black, or brown, other who embodies difference, transgresses norms and so presents the 'problem of race' (Hall, 2000; Henriques, 1998). Problematising 'whiteness', exposing the racialisation of 'whiteness', and so breaking the racist and racialising gaze, both in day-to-day and scientific discourses, is then an urgent task for a critical social psychology of racism.

Indeed, as Meredith Green and Christopher Sonn argue in their paper *'Examining discourses of whiteness and the potential for Reconciliation'* 'whiteness' should be seen as the problematic centre of racism. In their exploration into competing discourses on 'whiteness', nation, difference and Indigenous communities in Australia they demonstrate that the production, defence and contestation of white privilege can only be understood as ongoing political, psychological and, fundamentally, *collective* projects: products of both history and subjectivity. They discuss the need to constantly assert who belongs and who knows about 'being Australian' and 'the Indigenous other' and so reveal the unfinished and anxious busyness of 'whiteness' in this context. This highlights that while 'whiteness' is rarely 'seen', particularly by those of us who are privileged by it, the inherent tensions and contradictions of racism necessitate that 'whiteness' is constantly worked up and defended in discourses that appear as assertions of cultural connection, empathy and anti-racism. Hence, as Green and Sonn suggest, racism needs to be challenged by exposing the historical, institutional and political (re)production of white dominance, privilege and power, while engaging with Indigenous knowledges as spaces of critique, resistance and social transformation. What this invites is a series of strategic interventions into the production of meanings and thought alike, both of which the authors emphasize, are essentially argumentative and dialogical in nature. It is on the basis of such tactical interventions that new ways of seeing other each, and so new ways of imagining identity, belonging and community come into being. Their focus on history *and* the potential for change highlights the role of subjectivity and agency in the production and contestation of racism and the possibilities of resistance at both micro- and macro-politica levels.

These issues are taken up and developed by Steve Kirkwood, James Liu and Ann Weatherall in their examination of different strategies of collaboration and resistance people employ to expose racism and white privilege in *'Challenging the Standard Story of Indigenous Rights in Aotearoa/New Zealand.'* Their discussion brings to the fore questions about what ways in *which racism may be exposed, critiqued and disrupted in 'doing' identity—in contestory forms of discourse and oppositional subject-positionings.* How can we negotiate, navigate and confront the significance of racism and rupture its hold over the ways in which we make sense of ourselves and make sense of each other? Their discussion of how the ethnic majority may develop counter arguments to the 'Standard story' of colonisation and white privilege in Aotearoa/New Zealand illustrates how racist discourses may be challenged, problematised and, in certain moments, rejected. Their research examines the possibilities for supporting anti-racist projects (such as indigenous rights to land and the telling of Aotearoa's history) that facilitate personal and political action against discrimination. Kirkwood, Liu and Weatherall focus on the argumentative resources that might be drawn on as means of strengthening indigenous rights claims—in doing so they reveal how the oppressive monologue of white privilege may be undermined, and point to the ways in which we may disrupt and transgress the structures and discourses that continue to differentially racialize subjects of different

histories of possession/subjugation nonetheless. This, it should be noted, is a discursive tactics of resistance in which relevant strategies of argumentation and opposition remain embedded within the specific context of particular historical localities. What these authors highlight—in much the same manner as Green and Sonn—is that a critical social psychology of racism must examine our individual and collective involvements in procedures and practices of racism (which are always argumentative, dialogical, *contestable*) that racialise but that also reveal possibilities for engagement, collaboration, critical dialogue and intervention.

ADVOCATING DISRUPTION AND CONTRADICTION

The main question for our project, we believe, is what difference does difference make? That is, it is not enough for psychologists in the field of racism to point to and assess the ways in which racism operates and the ways it marks our understanding and subjectivities, as Hopkins, Reicher and Levine (1997) have also argued. It is not even enough to reveal its simultaneously psychological and political, subjective and ideological, local and global dynamics—though this would be a good start. We must problematise the (re)productions of racialised difference and ask—what is the point and purpose of our studies? Is it to examine and describe the social psychological machinery of racism—or is it to provoke, to *disrupt* the ways we think about, deny, 'do' and so perpetuate racialised categories, spaces, practices and identities—*both* in the day-to-day *and* in the institutionalised setting of social scientific discourse? We would suggest that it is this latter aim, to disrupt productions of unequal difference, and reveal our own collusion in racialised relations of power and histories of colonial violence and genocide, that we see as imperative to a functionally critical psychology of racism, and it is to this objective that the papers included here speak.

However it is also important to also recognise the political dangers inherent in overplaying resistance—and recognise that this could, ironically, undermine the analysis of racism itself—even in forums and relationships that set out to challenge racism (Srivastava, 1996). So while there *does* need to be an emphasis on the intransigence of racism and its multiple (re)workings we also need clear examples of how to think about cosmopolitanism/multiculture and viable resistant subjectivities. What we need to do is recognise the *contradictory but necessary* aims in presenting a critical analysis of racism—looking beyond the limiting discourses and subject positions of racism and imagining the possibilities in spaces and relationships that *de-racialise* practices and identities, *while* acknowledging the practical impossibility of moving beyond 'race' as part of our current ideological realities. So while we have to acknowledge the continuing psychic hold and the materiality of racism, as do papers included here, we as critical psychologists need to take up and challenge racialised practices and identity constructions; we need not only to examine how they are constructed—we also need to examine how they may be exposed and disrupted in everyday and scientific discourses. We need to talk and work beyond the 'fixing' and 'fitting' of racism (fixing the racialising gaze and fitting us into particular ways of being seen), while acknowledging the inherent difficulties, challenges and apparent impossibilities of such a project. Our role here is not of course to settle this debate, but rather to indicate its importance for a critical social psychology of racism.

Here it benefits us to make illustrative reference to a debate outside of the domain of Social Psychology, to focus our attentions very briefly on Edward Said's (1983) critique

of Michel Foucault's formidable analysis of modern power. While initially approving of Foucault's impressive formulations of a mode of power that is as productive as it extensive, as subjectifying as it is complete, Said later took Foucault to task for being 'power's scribe': that is, for an unbalanced focus which ultimately came to present modern power not only as monumental—indeed, as sophisticated and efficient almost beyond comprehension—but, worse yet, as practically inescapable. One might suggest that a similar argument may be levelled at those approaches to a critical social psychology of racism that emphasize the intransigence, the obduracy, the historical persistence of racist relations of power, without devoting adequate attentions to the practical means and procedures which may dismantle facets of its functioning. The implications thus set into play—that racism is an ever-present factor of history, an inevitable and even 'natural' social formation whose complexity and embeddedness will always elude our attempts at resistance—do not serve us well. None of this is to deny the terrible force and violence of various forms of racism and racialized thinking that have characterized Western modernity in particular for centuries, nor is it to easily subscribe to a utopian version of a non-racist future which causes us to become negligent in our attentions to the racisms of the here and now: it is though to suggest we need be aware of undermining our own ability to formulate meaningful forms of resistance by fixating simply on the immensity of racism, and to succumbing to tacit forms of resignation, defeatism, fatalism as a result. In this respect it is worth asking whether our objectives here are best described as 'a critical social psychology of racism', and not rather as a 'critical social psychology of antiracism' that places an account of disruption and resistance at its heart.

Critical antiracist work must therefore remain aware that recourse to the language and logics of 'race' remains always tethered to a set of conceptualizations that never completely escapes the horizon of racialization brought about by racism itself. The most vocal proponent of such a view is Paul Gilroy, who warns about the problems of slipping into a view in which 'race', however unintentionally, seems to precede racism (or exist outside of it), becoming all too easily thus 'an eternal cause of racism rather than . . . its complex, unstable product' (2004, p. 16). Or, in slightly different terms: 'Racism involves a mode of exploitation and domination that is not merely compatible with the phenomena of racialized differences *but has amplified and projected them in order to remain intelligible, habitable, and productive*' (p. 33, our emphasis).

If social psychology is to make a useful contribution to the analysis of racism, we suggest we need to explore the ways in which it becomes *unintelligible*, problematic, contested and rejected in people's everyday sense-making, cultural practices and social relationships. This is not to imagine some idealized world where racism has lost it's grip over our collective narratives and multiple subjectivities, a de- or a-racialised utopia (Ahmed, 2004), but it is to present the possibilities for thinking beyond and so living beyond the ways which racism currently limits the possibilities of community, selfhood and planetary humanity, as Gilroy (2000) has put it. We do not suggest that this is what the special issue has achieved, but we hope that the papers presented here will move towards this end by provoking discussions of how we 'do race' and how we 'disrupt race' in our work and in the everyday.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank all of those colleagues who acted as reviewers of papers for this special issue, as well as all of those who participated in the various '*Towards a critical social psychology of racism*' events held this year (an LSE workshop in March, two symposia held in South Africa in June and July 2005). We also thank the LSE Department of Sociology and LSE Teaching and Learning Centre for funding towards these collaborative events, which enabled us to set up a 'Critical Social Psychology of Racism Research Network' (for further information contact d.w.hook@lse.ac.uk or c.s.howarth@lse.ac.uk).

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