Addressing Denial: The First Step in Responding to Racism

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Racism is a set of beliefs and behaviors based on the presumption that "races" are inherently different, thereby excluding certain groups from equal access to social goods. Racist beliefs and behaviors are often manifested in multiple, historically specific, situationally variable, often contradictory ways that intersect very closely with nationalist and religious identity, and are gendered in complex ways. In Australia, the colonization process saw racism against Aboriginal people and 'non-white' foreigners dominated by notions of biological and moral inferiority (Hollinsworth 2006). This *"old form of racism"* in which ethnic minorities were viewed as biologically inferior was preeminent within the colonialism and institutionalized racism paradigm until the 1970s (McMaster 2001). As the voting power and contribution of immigrants of Non-English Speaking Backgrounds (NESB) began to become more visible, multiculturalism was adopted as a policy in Australia. This led to the recognition of the different ethnicities, cultures, religions and languages as well as ending the belief those other cultures were inferior to the mainstream white British culture (Freeman and Jupp 1999).

However, the changing policies have also lead to the transformation of the "*old racism"* in which ethnic communities were viewed as biologically and morally inferior into the *"new racism"* (also termed "cultural racism") where the relationship of power based on constructing "others" as different in order to exclude or ignore or exploit them is still maintained. The power to represent others, to negatively evaluate others, and to make these representations and evaluations prevail in public domains are still key features of new racisms. New racisms, based on old racisms, are concerned with a broad understanding of race issues as related to:
- cultural dimensions of racism
- linkages with identity, ethnic signifiers or markers
- construction of whiteness, invisibility of white majority
- racism's impact on certain subgroups e.g. women
- interconnections between race, nationhood, patriotism and nationalism
- changing language and discourses of racism
- dynamic nature of racism which can only be understood within historical specificity and change (Babacan and Babacan 2007, Solomos and Back 1996)

Racism defines the way in which social relations between people or society are structured and operates through a range of personal, relational, systemic and institutional practices that serve to devalue, exclude, oppress or exploit people. It is an act of power and is a tool for maintaining privilege. It involves the process of categorizing certain groups or individuals as inferior through the use of economic, social or political power that legitimates exploitation or exclusion (Mac an Ghaill 1999; Vasta & Castles 1996). Racism has been located in different settings such as individual, institutional, informal, formal, direct and indirect. A number of writers note that racism now is often not demonstrated by direct acts of hostility but rather by more covert comments relating to moral character, alien cultural values and lifestyles (Pedersen et al. 2004; Fraser and Islam 2000). Some of the new forms of racism centre on concepts of 'cultural incompatibility' and new forms of nationalism, about who is and is not an Australian. Others include concepts of differential citizenship rights as a move away from basic human rights. One of the most common forms of the new racism is Islamophobia, which does not focus on biological difference but on religious and cultural difference (Babacan 2007). The discourse in this context plays a prominent role in the reproduction of racism. It conveys and legitimates ethnic or racial stereotypes and prejudices among dominant group members and may thus form or confirm the social cognitions of others (Van Dijk 2000).

Racism is not only the spectacular events such as those that took place in Cronulla (Babacan & Babacan 2007). The ordinary "every day" racisms silently experienced by individuals and communities are of equal importance (Essed 1991). However experiences of racism are often denied, silenced, dismissed in what Sue (2005:1) refers to as a 'racism and the conspiracy of silence'.

Discourse and Denial

The problem of racism becomes even more of an issue when it is placed within the context of the range of contradictory discussions on many aspects of it, from the very definition of racism to the possible responses to it. An issue of particular importance in this is that of the contradictory actions of governments in accepting and legislating against racism on the one hand, while strongly denying its existence on the other. Often, the criticism of racism is couched in soft language, equating it with (negative) community relations or a need for harmony. This fails to address fundamental issues against discriminatory behaviour and action and ways in which legislation can be used as a facilitative mechanism to stop racist behaviour. The state policies of multiculturalism are not concerned as much with fostering cultural difference as much as creating safe channels that contain difference (Stratton 1998; Bottomley et al.1991; Stokes 1997). Racism is often covered up or downplayed as something else less deliberate or oppressive such as cultural misunderstanding by those who are not subject to its violence and belittling (Hollinsworth 2006: 40-45). There has been a reluctance to engage with root causes of racism by government and political leaders as it is seen as touching a sensitive nerve in their electorates. Rather wedge politics of using the

"other" for political gain has been mobilized. In practice, this leads to the increasing invisibility of racism and the denial of its existence or impacts.

An unpublished survey with 50 people from a cross section of the community, conducted in 2008 (Babacan) indicated a range of responses in relation to the question of 'does racism exist in our society'. Majority of respondents felt it existed in a small way. Some of the comments included:

Racism was in the past, there are some rednecks but they are thankfully less

Some groups just think that all their problems can be blamed on racism

Racism is no excuse to sit back and do nothing

Everyone has racism; ethnic groups are just as much racist against 'Australians'

Some of the ways in which racism is discussed or avoided forms the discourse of denial. Examples of racism denial in everyday talk are:

- *Denials, disclaimers or justifications are used to appear non-racist and block any inference of racism (e.g. I am not a racist but..)*

- *Denial as a strategy of defence as well as strategy of positive self portrayal*

- *Reversing the charge of racism (e.g. ethnic groups are racist too)*

- *Trivialising experiences or incidents or labelling it as an over exaggeration or referring it to as 'alleged racism' (i.e. language casting doubt)*

- *Using the word racism is treated as 'taboo' as we see in debates on Parliament- use of substitute words e.g. incivility, prejudice, misunderstanding, distrust*

- *Transference from self to reflect experience of others (e.g. my neighbour thinks)*

By attributing racism to a small minority, the dominant group/individual can define themselves as non-racist. Malik (1996) also points out that in the last two decades we have moved from the notion of ' right to be equal' to the 'right to be different' which has taken the focus away from hard edged issues such as racism. This is further exacerbated by the State positioning itself as 'raceless' when in fact it reflects the dominant society norms (Babacan 1996). Hage points out that the relationship between minority of hard core racists and those who perceive themselves as non-racist:

Violent racists are always a tiny minority. However, their breathing space is determined by the degree of "ordinary" non-violent racism a government and culture allow to flourish within it.
(Hage 2002: 247).

Much of the lay understandings of the world we live in are generated through a process of 'sense-making' through individual and collective attempts to make sense of events (Fletcher 1995). These cultural understandings based on sense-making are the centre of phenomenon such as the public support for Pauline Hanson, as the perceived spokeperson for the 'silent majority' and the 'ordinary battlers' (Rothwell 1997). Much of prejudice and discrimination can be unpacked in analyzing sense-making explanations that are supported by reference to in-groups and out-groups, racial and cultural difference and perceived injustice. As an example, racism focused on particular migrant groups can be situated within an easy-to-understand explanation of how a complex problem like unemployment is caused by these migrants taking all the jobs at the cost of the in-group.

Although racism appears contrary to democratic societal values, racism can still be articulated without denouncing democratic principles and, through transformation into more palatable concerns, becomes legitimate concern (Henry et al. 2000). Thus public discourses on immigration, multiculturalism, refugees and citizenship can often perpetuate coded societal messages. The stereotypical image of the 'other', the migrant or refugee, precedes their arrival in the new country through the media and other channels. This is further exacerbated by grand narratives built around international issues like the 'War on Terror', linking in to issues relating to Australian values, national identity, fear of the 'other', new forms of patriotism and the construction of a homogenous national identity that excludes some while uniting other sections of the community (Babacan & Babacan 2007). The discourse of nationalism can cover a hidden racist discourse through establishing who and what is Australian and unAustralian, from people through to values and to labels such as the 'Aussie Battler'. Carol Johnson has observed that "ordinary Australians are not Aboriginal, Asian, homosexual, lesbian, feminist or migrant" (2000: 64-65).

Riggs (2005) identifies that there is 'a collective psychical nature of racism' rather than an individual one. This means that at unconscious level individuals of the 'dominant society' have already invested in racism. However, when incidence of racism is voiced there is an implication for the individual. This is an outcome those individuals resist as they have difficulty in accepting that they have invested in racism, are beneficiaries of it and need to be accountable. At the individual level, the sense of belonging of those affected by race denial is constantly challenged with negative psycho-social results. Recent social psychological research for example shows how race denial is manifested in subtle and usually unconscious 'micro-aggressions' that serve to invalidate and devalue the racial and cultural identity and lived experience of those outside

dominant groups (Derald et al. 2007).   These processes contribute in very subtle ways to denial strategies and is achieved by not locating self in understanding racism, not challenging unearned privilege and not placing or seeing self in a network of racialised power relations in that society. Derald et al. (2007:275) state that "The power of racial microaggressions lies in their invisibility to the perpetrator and, oftentimes, the recipient". This also denies that dominant or 'white' subjectivities, as well as those of minorities, have been shaped in the historical context of colonial, racialised violence, the legacy which lingers today. The social consequences denial is manifested in:

- Lack of acceptance of unearned privilege of whiteness - is associated with a way of life and perspective where as racism is unseen or is considered an exceptional aberration
- Resentment of critique of whiteness as many see themselves as 'battlers', or oppressed in some way too
- This broad anxiety about the social order is embodied in political programs that emphasize a return through cultural renewal to a more secure – often mythical – idea of community.

The consequences of this is racialised subjectivities are constructed in 'talk' (discourse) which in turn reflects back to us the broader social context. Riggs (2005) points out that discourse shapes and constructs the way we view racism, both for members of the dominant society and targets of racism. He outlines two useful concepts: *Subjectivities* leading to denial of racism by dominant group members and *Subjectification* leading denial of racism by victims or target groups. As individuals are shaped by their society, it is often surprising to find targets of racism engaging in denial discourse. *Subjectification* is useful in analyzing that the targets' own perceptions are formed by what is mirrored to them in society. This leads to non-recognition of racism due to a range of factors such as self-blame, lack of knowledge of what constitutes racism, wanting to fit in and not stir up trouble and fear of further discrimination.

Racism denial has been widely identified as one central manifestation of 'new racism' that is pervasive and subtle, yet powerful in its capacity to exclude those signified as 'other' due to their racial, cultural and ethnic backgrounds and characteristics (Augoustinos and Every 2006). By racism denial we refer to the widespread belief that racism is no longer a feature of modern social relations, which is articulated through commonly expressed views such as; 'racism was in the past', 'it only exists in a minority of the population' or 'we need to focus on what unites us and our commonalities' (Babacan 2008). Such beliefs and views are generated through discourse or, as van Dijk (2000) puts it, '…they are expressed, enacted and confirmed by text and talk, such as everyday conversations, board meetings, job interviews, policies, laws, parliamentary debates….'. While race denial may appear to be less harmful than the very clear effects inflicted by 'old racisms' such as slavery or race segregation, its power lies normalizing and sanitizing dominant belief systems while excluding and

marginalizing the beliefs and views of those defined as 'other'. Statements such as 'I'm not racist but…' render racism invisible and legitimates racist behaviour. Such statements position perpetrators outside the boundaries of racism, while still expressing derogatory views about particular groups and assuming a power to define who belongs and who doesn't within a given community or society according to racial and cultural characteristics. As such, the effects of race denial are harmful and serve to reinforce patterns of inclusion and exclusion, dominance and subordination.

Denial of racism can also send a clear message that racist behaviors are permissible and will not meet with sanctions. The Cronulla riots in New South Wales are an example of this process. In the aftermath of the incidents, the Prime Minister of Australia denied that racism played a key role in the unfolding of these events. Poynting et al. (2004) argue that the then Prime Minister's refusal to accept race as a cause of the riots led to the State's refusal to act on the issues of racism and sent a clear message that there is state "permission to hate". Smith (2006:9) argues that if the then Prime Minister had accepted that racism was an underlying cause for the incidents then he would have had to specify the causes of such sentiments, thereby drawing negative attention to his government's policies and practices.

The denial of racism fails to validate victims' experiences and transfers the blame from the perpetrator to the victim, blaming them for their failure to fit in, a process that has major consequences on the self-worth and well-being of the victims. It also works by trivializing the concerns and needs of minorities and by a refusal to recognize the contribution of minority groups and individuals. This form of denial and silence is denoted as a form of oppression by Stokes as:

> *A person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. Non-recognition or mis-recognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted and reduced mode of being.*
> *(Stokes 1997:19)*

A clear understanding of racism denial and its impact on society is difficult to articulate because of a number of factors. The tendency of governments to respond to the issues of racism by the 'soft approach', affirming the positives, adds into the agenda of racism denial by glossing over the hard data required to work on the issues. It does not allow for research into the area of racism, and ensures there is very little evidence as how racism is constructed, where and how it is manifested, and what works in terms of anti-racism strategies (Babacan 2008). Even where research is conducted into these issues, it is often severely curtailed in terms of its scope and scale by the denial of racism within the structures that guide the research. Furthermore, racism denial also ensures that there are no policy responses to address the issues of racism or its impacts, no validation of the experiences of those who experience it on a daily basis, nor any

attempt to redress the suffering (Babacan 2006). Racism denial is also strengthened by the fact that only a small percentage of racist incidents are reported to the official structures that exist to deal formally with them. Some of the reasons for this underreporting that emerge from research include:

- Fear of authority.
- Lack of information about their rights.
- Do not want to be seen ungrateful.
- Cannot identify forms of racism.
- They have come from worse situations of racism and feel any unfair treatments are mild.
- Lack of English language skills.
- Fear of the consequences of complaining.
- Do not have the time.
- Do not have support systems to assist them with complaints.
- Do not have confidence to undertake complaints, with feelings of powerlessness.
- Do not believe in the efficacy of systems of redness and feeling that complaints will not change things.   (Babacan 1998, HREOC 2004)

The relationships between racism denial and broader social outcomes are also difficult to quantify, as racism denial is not easily measured on a clear and quantifiable spectrum between racist and non-racist. Rather, race denial is often seen as common sense, benign in its intent and shaped by context. There is no simple expression of racism denial but rather a combination of often contradictory practices, expressions and beliefs that play out differently, with different effects in different contexts. Similarly, there is no clear division between those who are included and excluded within and between groups. By this, we mean for example, that there are racial divisions and racist behaviors expressed within non-white populations as well as in dominant and white population groups. As such it is impossible to identify clear and direct relationships between racist discourse and specific social outcomes.

Often people who are targets of racism are blamed for overreacting to a particular event, incident or person.   Writing in the context of racial microaggression, Derald et al. (2007:279) point out that responses for minorities are contextual and arise from a variety of life experiences of individuals. For minorities, a particular incident was not the first time that similar situations had occurred. What may appear as a random event to a member of the dominant culture is a familiar and repeated experience for the person from minority culture. People from dominant cultures, while making appraisals about whether a situation or event was racist, do not share these multiple experiences; and they evaluate either the incident or their own behaviors in the moment through a singular event (Dovidio & Gaertner 2000). Thus, they fail to see a pattern of bias and can easily deny any form of racism or discrimination (Sue 2005).

Even though race denial is difficult to measure, the harm that is generated through racist discourse is real and there are real effects. There is ample evidence to show that racism itself impacts on life chances and social inclusion outcomes. Studies indicate that life chances of racialised minorities are adversely affected (Li 1998, Bonnet 2000). Social signification based on "race and culture" facilitates social exclusion and hinders inclusion. The findings of studies confirm that the life chances are impacted in the areas of occupational status and earning, educational achievement and social integration. Racism denial exacerbates the impacts of racism by denying the victims of the validation of the experience and also creating an environment where appropriate responses are not developed. Decisions such as who gets let into the country and who does not, who gets a job and who doesn't, who can participate in community affairs and who can't, are all shaped by discursively constructed norms and values (van Dijk 2000). The outcomes have effects at both the structural and the individual level. At the structural level, patterns of socio economic status have a racial character with those from non-white population groups situated subordinate to white population groups (Pyke 2008).

Access to discourse is, itself, a form of domination (van Dijk 2000) and opinion makers reformulate the prejudices found in society- through the search for core national values, creation of national identity, heroes, legends which are exclusionary or tokenistic while at the same time treating race as a taboo subject. Strategies of denial has a "special role in
the formulation and the reproduction of racism" (Van Dijk, 2000: 193).

Overcoming denial of racism is the first anti-racism response…

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