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Racism Denial in Australia: The power of silence



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Ideas of 'race' have shaped social and political relations all over the world over centuries. Racist beliefs and behaviours are often manifested in multiple, historically specific, situationally variable, often contradictory ways that intersect very closely with nationalist and religious identity, and are gendered. We need to think of racism in complex ways. Van Dijk provides useful ways of thinking about racism: *Racism as domination*—a specific kind of power of one group over others; *Racism as discrimination*—discriminatory practices that reproduce racism in everyday life but also limit access to control over resources causing inequalities; *Racism as Institution*—which penetrates the different levels of organisations and their procedures such as political, judicial, media, education systems; *Racism as racist beliefs*—which inform everyday interactions including prejudices, stereotypes, myths and racist ideologies; and *Racism as discourse*—which reproduces racism, through public debates, literature, film, news, articles, and even gossip.

While many western democracies, including Australia, denounce racism and enact anti-discriminatory legislation, there is a deafening silence and denial about the prevalence, nature and extent of experiences of racism. 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'. We know very little of the experiences of racism by minorities in Australia as there has been very little research funded about the experiences of targets of racism. Most of the conducted research has related to attitudes of broader community, community relations and social cohesion and little about the direct experiences of racism by survivors. The few exceptions have been the work undertaken by the Australian Human Rights Commission (*National Inquiry into Racist Violence and Isma*□, *The experiences of Muslim Australians*) and the work undertaken by Babacan and Hollinsworth in Queensland. As an academic working in this field for over two decades, I can relay the numerous accounts given by decision makers to deny funding for research into the experiences of targets of racism.

The notion of racism as an *institution* determines (in open and more subtle ways) the production of knowledge and research about racism. Critical 'race theorists' identify this as a major issue in relation to research and knowledge production, particularly in post-colonial countries. The dominant theories of knowledge prevail and determine the nature of knowledge that is to be created and legitimatised, including *who can know*, *how they know* and what counts as knowledge. Often, dominant knowledge frameworks operate to devalue and marginalise other 'ways of knowing'. Hence we have scant knowledge in Australia about the daily experiences of personal and institutional racism, all of which feeds what many scholars refer to as a 'conspiracy of silence' about racism.

The reasons for this are complex. Australia has a historical legacy of racism which it has not reconciled with. Today the controversies about massacres of Aboriginal peoples, the stolen generation, native title rights, and stolen wages continue. Similar legacies prevail from a multicultural perspective. The first act of a federated Parliament was the *Immigration Restriction Act 1901* which was followed by open and hidden forms of policy implementations such as the White Australia Policy. As a nation we have been dealing with issues of racism now for over 200 years, a historical fact that weighs us down.

As social mores have changed over time, overt forms of racism are no longer acceptable. However, the fear of being perceived as racist continues. We see many examples at the policy level of respective Australian Governments distancing themselves from addressing key events involving racism. Some recent examples include denial of racism as a factor in the attack on international students, minimizing racism elements of the Cronulla riots, dismissal of attacks on Muslim people post-September 11 and the suspension of the anti-discrimination legislation

as part of the intervention in Northern Territory. There is a reluctance to address issues of racism head-on due to fear of being accused of racism, and to admit to racism in the fear that it will bring up issues of compensation and retribution such as in the area of Native Title.

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. Academics such as Gusa argue that the dominant culture can easily come to see itself as entitled to this pre-eminence based upon its own worth. The privileged group of any society often does not see the benefits it has nor admit to the suffering of the 'other'. The dismissal of everyday experiences of racism results in denial and lack of validation of the subjective experiences of individuals. Admitting to racism necessitates a discussion about power and power sharing. No privileged sector of society is likely to give up power readily and there is an innate fear (unconscious or conscious) of loss of status, position and privilege.

The key features of racism include the power to represent, to negatively evaluate others, and to make these representations prevail in the public domain. The access to discourse is one of key areas of inequality and the denial of voice is a way of perpetuating racism. Racism denial occurs at macro levels and also at more micro and even mundane levels. Examples of racism denial in everyday talk include disclaimers or justifications used to appear non-racist and block any inference of racism (e.g. 'I am not a racist but...'). They also appear as defensive strategies to indicate positive self-portrayal or even by reversing the charge of racism (e.g. 'ethnic groups are racist too'). Other examples of race denial include trivialising experiences or incidents or labelling it as an over-exaggeration or referring it to as 'alleged racism', using language to cast doubt, or by avoiding the use of the word 'racism', treating it as taboo and substituting other words for it, e.g. incivility, prejudice, misunderstanding. It is done by transference from self to reflect experience of others (e.g. 'my neighbour thinks'). And finally, it is also done by sending coded societal messages about immigration, multiculturalism, particular groups etc., through grand narratives built about lifestyle, culture on issues such as land rights, war on terror, cultural diversity.

Racism denial has serious consequences at different levels:

- At a macro level there is not enough evidence to understand the nature and extent of racism and to develop appropriate strategies to combat it.
- Silence about racism is an act of oppression. *Omission* (silence, denial, ignoring) is one of the major strategies that endorse racism. As noted above racism can be experienced as a form of domination. While omission and silence are subtle and often not quantifiable by the people experiencing them, they form a powerful form of oppression. Existing scant research of survivors indicates that they feel a strong sense of domination. Moreover, racism denial works by trivialising the concerns and needs of minorities and a refusal to recognise the contribution of minority groups and individuals to society.
- Lack of support for the targets of racism. In many areas of social policy and program we use strengths-based approaches, such as student-centred approaches in education, patient-centred approaches in health, and consumer/client-centred approaches in service delivery. The silence on racism denies such strength-based approaches to targets of racism and results in the failure to validate experiences of targets of racism and transfers the blame from the perpetrator to the target, blaming them for their failure to fit in. These processes have major consequences on self-worth, social capital and community resilience. This is one of the major reasons for the under-reporting of racism.

Challenging the silence around racism is not easy. Professor Gusa, in the *Harvard Education Review*, argued that when racism is challenged, people within the dominant culture can react to affirm their own power, creating a 'chilly climate' for others. When incidences of racism are voiced there is resistance as individuals have difficulty in accepting that they have invested in racism, are beneficiaries of it and fear the possible need to be accountable. This makes it difficult to engage in constructive discussions about racism. Moreover, as discourse shapes the way we think about racism, it is not surprising to find that the targets of racism, themselves, often engage in denial of racism.

While racism denial may appear to be less harmful than the 'old racisms' such as slavery or segregation, its power lies in normalising and sanitising dominant belief systems while excluding and marginalising the beliefs and views of those defined as 'other'. Denial of racism can also send a clear message that racist behaviours are permissible and will not meet with sanctions, which explains the few cases brought to bear under existing anti-discrimination legislation.

As we look to find Australia's place in the world we need to reconsider how we reformulate the prejudices found in society in our attempts to search for core national values, creation of national identity, community relations, social capital and genuine inclusion. There is an honest need for the assessment of the special role that racism denial plays in the reproduction of racism. We must remember that racism denial has consequences, not just for the targets of racism but for all of society. In the end we are all diminished...

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