

# Role of Discomfort and Disruption in Anti-Racism

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**Racism is a complex issue and can have strong impacts on the feelings, views, attitudes and values held by people involved. Open discussion of racism has potential consequences or implications or threats to individuals, community groups, civil society, government, industry or other stakeholders. At the core of any intervention to challenge racism are ways to critically think about racism and how they are reproduced. However, racism is a 'sensitive' topic for discussion, research and policy. There is a need to 'disrupt' the way we think about racism. The way that this disruption can occur is to work through the discomfort that discussions on racism produce to reach a position of awareness and develop new possibilities. This paper explores what constitutes sensitive discussion, then addresses issues of racism denial and focuses on ideas of discomfort.**

## Introduction

Issues of racism, racial/ethnic identity, citizenship and nationalism receive high media attention and stir up highly emotional debates and responses. Hollinsworth (2006) points out that racism is a relationship of dominance and subordination between social groups and is subject to variation over time and space. 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). Racism operates at various levels, has multiple manifestations and its language, logic and expression shifts over time. Racism is not only about the spectacular or violent events such as those that took place in Cronulla (Babacan 2006), and the ordinary 'every day' racisms silently experienced by individuals and communities are of equal importance (Essed 1991).

Research indicates that racial discrimination and negative attitudes towards Indigenous and culturally diverse Australians remain prevalent throughout the Australian community. For example Dunn *et al.*, (2009) found that 63% of Indigenous Australians experience name-calling, ridicule and abuse on a daily basis. Dunn *et al.*, (in a research project on racism to which one of the authors is also principal researcher), in a large national study, demonstrated that 78 % of Australians believe humankind is made up of separate races, 41% believe that there are cultural groups that do not fit

into Australian society, 85% believe there is racial prejudice in Australia although, paradoxically 87% believed that it is a good thing for society to be made up of different cultures. The same study found anti-Asian sentiment (24%), anti-Indigenous sentiment (28%), anti-Muslim sentiment (49%), and anti-Semitic sentiment (23.3%). Babacan and Hollinsworth (2009), in a Queensland wide study, identified a range of racist incidents including physical violence, threat of violence, verbal and written abuse, property damage, humiliating behaviour, racist graffiti, racist media coverage, direct acts of discrimination and institutional discrimination. Surprisingly 17% of respondents had experienced racially motivated physical violence. The authors identified primary sites for incidents of racism on the street, at work, in educational settings (schools and universities), renting, seeking employment, public transport, social-recreational-sport settings and media.

As Kershaw (2005) argues such occurrences are not novel in settler societies. The recurrence of key elements such as socio-economic disadvantage, media hostility, the real or imagined anxiety that immigration is 'out of control' is a feature of the politics of over the last century. However, Kershaw notes (in the context of migration) that what is different is the combination enduring and new variables, together with the changing global context of migration processes which brings a sharp edge to the contemporary political saliency of racism. Babacan and Babacan (2012) point out that new boundaries of inclusion and exclusion have been drawn in Australia, exacerbated by the conjoining of the 'war on terror', Indigenous welfare reform and concerns over asylum seekers. The adoption of a 'protective framework' has been accompanied by an erosion of civil liberties, freedoms and human rights. All along discourses have been couched in liberal and egalitarian tropes that position the speaker as rational, fair-minded and non-prejudiced (Mitchell *et al.*, 2011). Such constructions legitimize current inequalities by 'blaming the victims' while evading any responsibility. It is now possible to convey racist views without seemingly being so and to be concerned about democracy. In this way racism, and its denial, are reproduced in everyday contexts by ordinary members of the majority group (Augoustinos & Every 2007, Mitchell *et al.*, 2011).

Strategies to confront racism are multi-dimensional and incorporate a diverse range of targets and methods (Anthias and Lloyd 2002). At the core of any intervention to challenge racism are ways to critically think about racism and how they are reproduced. However, racism is a 'sensitive' topic for discussion, research and policy. Thus the dialogue on racism which is required to address the issue at different levels does not occur. Racism denial, disavowal and censorship prohibit any meaningful exploration about the way racism is reproduced in everyday situations. This paper argues that there is a need to 'disrupt' the thinking on racism. The way that this disruption can occur is to work through the discomfort that discussions on racism produce to reach a position of awareness and develop new possibilities. This paper explores what constitutes sensitive discussion, then addresses issues of racism denial and focuses on ideas of discomfort.

## Racism as a Sensitive Topic

Racism is a complex issue and can have strong impacts on the feelings, views, attitudes and values held by people involved. Open discussion of racism has potential consequences or implications or threats to individuals, community groups, civil society, government, industry or other stakeholders.

There are many phenomena that, within specific cultural and social contexts, are "sensitive". They may be defined as "sensitive" if they are private, stressful or sacred, and discussion tends to generate an emotional response (McCosker *et al.*, 2001). These include difficult topics, including taboo subjects, which "are laden with emotion or which inspire feelings of awe or dread" (Lee 1993:6).

Renzetti and Lee (1993:6) identify dimensions of sensitivity to include: a) where there is intrusion into the private sphere or delves into some deeply personal experience; b) where there is concern with deviance or social control; c) where it impinges on the vested interests of powerful persons or the exercise of coercion or domination; or d) where the discussion deals with things that are sacred to those being studied that they do not wish profaned. Renzetti and Lee's work is important in highlighting the issue of power and vested interest. They argue that there is a tendency to avoid subjects such as racism either due to motivated explicit identification or through emotional group identification. Sieber and Stanley (1988:55) convincingly argue that shying away from controversial topics, simply because they are controversial is a form of avoidance of responsibility.

Riggs (2005) outlines that speaking of 'race relations' requires the speaker to elaborate on many things, including where they speak from, what it means to speak from that position, how they understand 'race' itself, what the implications of this understanding, who are they accountable to. Nyamathi (1998:65) suggests that in sensitive conversations those who are 'impoverished, disenfranchised, and/or subject to discrimination, intolerance, subordination, and stigma', including women, children, ethnic communities, immigrants, sex workers, the homeless, gay men and women, older adults, and the mentally ill are in the most vulnerable populations. As Jacques (2003) notes, the dominant or powerful group has a huge vested interest in its own privilege and will often be oblivious to its own prejudices. It will regard its racist attitudes as nothing more than common sense. Only when challenged by those on the receiving end is racism outed, and attitudes begin to change (Jacques 2003).

## Racism Denial

*There are two subjects that we are never permitted to discuss with any seriousness: race and religion, and how our attitudes toward the first are rooted in the second (Vidal 2003: 73).*

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 2007). By racism denial I 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 effects inflicted by 'old racisms', its power lies in normalising and sanitising dominant belief systems while excluding and marginalising the beliefs and views of those defined as 'other'. Statements such as 'I'm not racist but...' render racism invisible and legitimates racist behavior (Augoustinos and Every 2007). 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.

Hook (2004) provides a useful differentiation between *denial* and *disavowal*. Denial is understood as the refutation of another's claim or statement, and the subsequent blanking out of the affect associated with the occurrence of that claim while disavowal is understood as an act of perception that, whilst refuting the knowledge of another's claim, actually evidences the ongoing impact on affect that the claim makes. Disavowal is like 'contradiction management' in people may believe they hold non-racist views, yet their behaviour may be racist (Hook 2005:17).

Riggs (2005) identifies that there is 'a collective psychological nature of racism' rather than an individual one. This means that at the 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. Finally, the denial of racism can also send a clear message that racist behaviours are permissible and will not meet with sanctions.

Often people who are targets of racism are blamed for overreacting to a particular event, incident or person. The responses for minorities are contextual and arise from a variety of life experiences of individuals (Derald *et al.*, 2007). For minorities, a particular incident may not be 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 behaviours 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).

## Disrupting Racism

The emergence of contemporary forms of racism has been continually contested (Winant 2001). Paradies (2005) argues that “anti-racism” strategies comprise any approach that reduces power differentials through advantaging subordinate racial groups and/or disadvantaging dominant racial groups. The complexity and the multi-layered nature of anti-racism have been echoed in scholarship. For example Winant (2006) urges us to distinguish between the *experiential* dimensions of racial politics (micro-level raciality, the *personal or small-scale* aspects of racial formation) from the *social structural* dimensions of racial politics (macro-level raciality, the institutional, governmental, and world-systemic aspects of racial formation). There is a need for understanding racism not as an intrapsychic phenomenon, but rather as a social phenomenon that structures the lives of people and are played out in a range of contexts (Leach 2005, Riggs & Augoustinos 2004). Howarth and Hook (2005:425) invite to us to consider the social and psychological possibilities and conditions for *disrupting* racialising practices and claims to privilege, belonging and knowing. They note that in order to challenge racism we need to understand it by a set of critical questions:

- 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? (p. 426).

Disruption is a strategy to enable us to unravel the psychological and political, subjective and ideological, local and global dynamics of racism and to problematise the reproduction of how racialised differences come into being and perpetuated. As noted by Howarth and Hook (2005:429) we need to “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 settings”.

Understanding that human agency is critical to all forms of racism and subjectivities are formed in relation to power and discourse (Butler 1997, van Dijk 2000). Some scholars advocate a move to a ‘post-race’ paradigm. It is argued that as ‘race’ does not exist we should not be engaging with it as it reinforces the binary definitions of this social construct (Gilroy 1998, 2002). However, authors such as Mason (1994:845) remind us that consideration of ‘race’

... is a legitimate concept for sociological analysis because social actors treat it as a real basis for social differentiation and organise their lives and exclusionary practices in terms of it”.

Howarth & Hook (2005:426) make an important point in relation to this. They state:

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

Challenging everyday racism is complicated because it is seen to be too confronting, disrupting the flow of conversation, social expectations to fit in and nature of relationships, fear of provoking conflict or aggression, whether they could make a difference causing offence, threatening individual and group identity (Condor,2006, Babacan, Mitchell *et al.*, 2011). Authors have pointed to the ‘conspiracy of silence’ around racism for a long time (Sue 2005). For example, Augoustinos and Every (2007) find that accusations of racism attract greater social censure than the racist talk itself. Dei and Vickers (1997) assert that Canadians are at least as likely to be punished for breaking the silence about racism as for perpetuating it. It is argued that racism necessitate that ‘whiteness’<sup>1</sup> is constantly worked up and defended in discourses that appear as assertions of cultural connection, empathy and anti-racism (Green & Sonn 2005).

Disrupting racism requires a critical gaze on our relationships at different levels, beginning with self and interpersonal levels. Mitchell *et al.*, (2011), in their research, concluded that most people will only speak out where they feel comfortable. However, given the power and contextual relations that privilege groups and support racism, there is unlikely to be a situation in which there will be a level of comfort in challenging racism (Kennedy & Pronin 2008, Czopp *et al.*, 2006). Mitchell *et al.*, (2011:339) state that

a possible approach, rather than aiming to eliminate discomfort, may be to develop strategies to engage with discomfort, in both the challenger and the person(s) being challenged.

Through discomfort, people can go towards dealing with their inner racism and via a process of introspection go onto comprehensive awareness. Sue (2006) suggests a 5-stage approach of racial and cultural identity development to describe how people of racialised others and dominant culture individuals come to terms with their own inner racism or exposure to discrimination. The stages are as follows: 1) denial (of being racist or seeing incidents as racist); 2) when an event or a person challenges the individual’s belief system and prompts them to begin questioning their racial understanding and perceptions of racial groups; 3) feelings of anger and/or guilt as they come to an

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<sup>1</sup> I acknowledge problematic nature of ‘whiteness’ theories. There is no scope for discussion in this paper about the topic but there is ample scholarship on the topic. The term can be substituted by concepts such as privilege, dominance and power.

increasingly fuller understanding of culturally sanctioned racism; 4) introspective role and more balanced appreciation for the strengths of all cultures alongside a maturing awareness of racism and oppressive social structures; and 5) a state of integrative awareness, which involves acceptance of oneself as a cultural being and a deep commitment to eradicating oppression of all forms.

However, part of the difficulty allowing oneself to experience discomfort in relation to racism relates to what Tatum (1997) calls the 'paralysis of fear' in which people fear the consequences of open discussion about racism. Tatum argues that "in order for there to be meaningful dialogue, fear, whether of anger or isolation, must eventually give way to risk and trust" (Tatum, 1997:200).

Authors emphasise the importance of instigation of real and open-hearted discussions relating to racism (Favaro 2004, Tatum 1997). Racism needs to be challenged by exposing the historical, institutional and political (re)production of dominance, privilege and power, while engaging with other knowledges as spaces of critique, resistance and social transformation. What this implies is a series of strategic interventions into the production of meanings and thought (Green and Sonn 2005). It also means that we turn the direction of the gaze away from the 'racialised other' to how power, privilege and dominance are reproduced (Hall 2000). Ring (2008) urges us to not be afraid to deal with the denial, confusion, and anger that may emerge, and have confidence in the ability of people to reflect, reconcile, and grow through the process. Appropriate support, skills, resources to build this in appropriate settings (classrooms, workshops) are encouraged (Mitchell *et al.*, 2011).

It is only through such critical approaches that we can begin to imagine new forms identity, belonging and community.

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