# Cyber-racism in schools

**Nerina J. Caltabiano[1] and Stephen V. Torre[2]**
[1]Senior Lecturer in Psychology, Department of Psychology, James Cook University, PO Box 6811, Cairns Queensland, 4870, Nerina.Caltabiano@jcu.edu.au
[2]Department of Humanities, Associate Professor of English & Deputy Head of School, James Cook University, PO Box 6811, Cairns, Queensland, 4870, Stephen.Torre@jcu.edu.au

[1]***Nerina Caltabiano*** is the coordinator of the Honours program in psychology at the Cairns Campus of James Cook University, and currently the convenor of the Jocelyn Wale Seminar Series. She researches and teaches in the field of social psychology and has teaching responsibilities at both the Cairns and Singapore campuses. She is a member of both the Australian and the American Psychological Societies, and is the Treasurer of the Personality and Individual Differences Interest group of the Australian Psychological Society. Together with her collaborators, she has been the recipient of several grants including an ARC Discovery Grant. She was a recipient of the 2009 Docemus Award for Volunteers given by the Cairns Catholic Diocese in recognition of unwavering commitment to Catholic Education. Her current research interests are in social cognition, socio-emotional development of children, and well-being.

[2]***Stephen Torre*** is Associate Professor of English at James Cook University. His research interests are in the short story, writing and culture in the tropics, and twentieth-century avant-gardes. He is the editor of *etropic: electronic journal of studies in the tropics,* the project leader of the Cairns Institute's *Cultural Atlas of Tropical Australia,* and the covenor of the *Tropics of the Imagination Conference*. He teaches courses on Australian literature and culture, Avant-Garde/Modernist literature, and Short Story Writing. He is one of the judges of the Foundation for Australian Literary Studies annual Colin Roderick Award for the best book published in Australia which deals with any aspect of Australian life.

**Racist violence in schools is on the documented increase worldwide. This paper will make the argument that the nature of and motivations for such attacks are changing as a function of the new electronic communication technologies available to students. The prevalence in school communities is thought to be under-represented due to the under-reporting of incidents to authorities. Victims may belong to visible minorities, new migrants, or refugees. Precursors to incidents of racist violence include physical appearance, languages spoken, and learned discriminatory attitudes from within the family and community at large. Combining these variables with the multimedia inter-personal and inter-group communication technologies available to young people, the scene is set for the prevalence of racial vilification to escalate within our school settings.**

Despite the many personal, social, cultural, intellectual and political levels on which the battle to defeat racism has occurred, it remains a destructive element of human behaviour present in cultures and countries around the globe. Although racism may be enacted on macro-social levels, a particularly destructive and personally distressing manifestation of new racism is in more specialised niches, such as schools, as indicated in this Daily Mail report:

"We are seeing a real increase in racism in some areas which is down to factors like a growth of Islamaphobia in society which is filtering into classrooms. Racism towards Eastern European and Gipsy and Traveller communities is also on the increase".

(Talwar, 2012, np)

The infiltration of racism into schools has been aided by vectors such as new information technologies. The resultant "cyber-racism" is an emerging and so far un-theorized area of interest in the field of new racisms. Although the following two quotes are not examples of cyber-racism, they conform to the more typical forms of racism experienced by school students around the country. The following examples are from school students cited in the 1991 Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission report and epitomize the type of racism that is experienced by school students on a frequent basis.

"They call me names and won't let me join their group. They steal my things, put smoke(s) in my bag and make trouble for me with parents and teachers, abuse me for something I didn't do and also quarrel with me over silly things. I know it's racist because they told me I should go back home and that they don't need black strangers in their country".

(Moss & Castan, 1991, p. 159)

"It happened more than once. Several Australian students have tried to corner me during recess. They said Asian students were never wanted at their school and that I would invite trouble if I hang around any Australian girls".

*(*Moss & Castan, 1991, p. 158*)*

The potent combination of racism and bullying in schools can result in serious trauma and sometimes tragic outcomes, as in the following report:

"A school bully who drove a 14-year old girl to the brink of suicide has been convicted of racial harassment. His victim was subjected to six months of abuse. It included chants of "White, white, white is right, kick them out, fight, fight, fight". She was also told "Go back to your own country".

(Parker, 2009, np)

The newsworthiness of such events can bring unwanted attention to both victims and perpetrators. The latter of which may be subject to legal repercussions. However, in this paper the focus will be on racism in schools and how an understanding of cyber-racism might be developed.

# Definitions

Racism is a historically persistent behaviour in human interactions. It can encompass an attitudinal component, a behavioural component, or both. Beliefs or attitudes about a particular race can result in dangerous circumstances if directed towards a particular individual or target group. The

behavioural component finds expression in racist violence (see Gilovich, Keltner & Nisbett, 2011). The National Inquiry into Racist Violence by the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission (Nugent *et al*., 1989) defined "racist violence as a specific act of violence, intimidation or harassment carried out against an individual, group or organisation on the basis of race, colour, descent or national or ethnic origin" (np). Connolly (1996 cited in Aveling, 2007) acknowledges that racism is complex and that it is "not a static, fixed, or coherent set of beliefs that uniformly influences the way individuals think and behave regardless of context" (p. 70). Furthermore, Raby (2004) makes the point that there is a plurality of racisms and that racism can come in a multiplicity of forms (p.368). How racism finds expression among youth, when issues of identity are at a formative stage, is not clearly understood and further complicated by the emerging manifestation of cyber racism.

Traditionally, racist violence has been carried out overtly in the form of physical aggression generally amongst males, and covertly in the form of emotional harassment amongst girls. With the latest technological developments racism has been transformed into virtual forms which are difficult to manage and control.

Clearly, racism and how it manifests itself has changed over time. Gilovich, Keltner and Nisbett (2011) define modern racism as "prejudice directed at other racial groups that exists alongside rejection of explicitly racist beliefs" (p. 445). Back (2002) argues that cyberspace has enabled online racism to flourish. While in the past, prejudice, discrimination and individual racism found expression in the material world, physical boundaries no longer protect an individual from cyber attacks in the virtual world. Cyber bullying can be regarded as a form of covert bullying that is mediated through the use of technology, such as mobile phones or the Internet (Li, 2006), devices that have been embraced by the so-called 'digital natives'. Racist rhetoric can easily be disseminated and accessed through email, instant text messaging, Facebook, discussion boards, and Twitter to name a few.

There are also several aspects of cyber-racism that have not been related to previous forms. Cyber-racism is like cyber bullying but its focus would be on issues of racism and wouldn't distinguish between gender, age or geographical location. For the perpetrator it offers anonymity, privacy and the capability of fast if not instantaneous launching of racist attacks against numerous wide-spread targets on the one hand, or highly specific individual targets on the other. For the victim, any cyber-attack will be distressing, may increase paranoia and suspicion, may render the victim defenceless and helpless, and may even be life-threatening. Another individual involved in a cyber-racism scenario is often the bystander who may be witness to the cyber-attack but may play a voyeuristic role, evading any instinct or responsibility to intervene in the belief that someone else will do something about the situation. Placing all of this within a school context, where we would expect to find youth with varying vulnerabilities and abilities to deal with such stressors, the scene is set for an explosive expansion of racist attacks that may be difficult to detect, prevent and contain.

# Theoretical Perspectives

In order to try and understand cyber-racism and its impact on the individual (particularly on younger people of school age), it is essential to consider some of the theoretical perspectives of racism per se. Some research has focussed on how long-term cumulative experiences of racism can lead to the development of the invisibility syndrome (Franklin & Boyd-Franklin, 2000). That is, victims of racism subjectively report experiencing little acknowledgment from society in general regarding their abilities and achievements. In this situation, the victims of racist attitudes and stereotyping experience a denigration if not erasure of their individuality and talent. The psychological conditions produced as a function of this constitute the syndrome symptoms. The victim experiences this as a microaggression. According to Sue, Line, Torino, Capodilupo and Rivera (2009) racial microaggressions are "brief and commonplace daily verbal, behavioural and environmental indignities, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative racial slights and insults to the target person or group" (p. 183). If not resolved these can cause mental health problems such as chronic indignation, anxiety, anger, violence, lack of self-esteem, depression, stress, or substance abuse, and in the worst case scenario, self-harming behaviours, suicide and even death (see Franklin, 2004). It follows that the insidious and pervasive influences of cyber-racism might well amplify the prevalence of the invisibility syndrome given the scale and power of modern cyber technologies.

In other basic theoretical work on racism, Harrell (2000) has identified six types of stress related to racism which can lead to intense emotional and psychological reactions including anxiety, anger, a sense of vulnerability, and sadness. These are (1) racism-related life events, (2) vicarious racism experiences, (3) daily racism micro-stressors, (4) chronic-contextual stress, (5) collective experiences, and (6) transgenerational transmission (Harrell, 2000).

Each of Harrell's stress types can be applied to the school environment.

1. Racism-related life events are significant life experiences with racism that often involve overt discrimination. One example could involve using a school child's appearance to discriminate against them by denying them the opportunity of gaining a leadership role within their school because of their appearance, and then this being used as a taunt via instant messaging in alternate settings.

2. Vicarious racism experiences may not occur directly to the school child but to his or her friendship group, family members or strangers from the same race or community. When peers are receiving these cyber attacks the school child also experiences racism through its ingroup membership.

3. Daily racism micro-stressors can be construed as being constant reminders, references or cues regarding one's race—such as might appear on bulletin boards or Facebook pages. They tend to be subtle putdowns or exclusions which can develop in intensity as a result of being continual and omnipresent. The victim thus feels that no space can provide safety from such micro-stressors.

4. Chronic-contextual stress relates to societal structural inequities and diminished opportunities for individuals that are racially different from a perceived mainstream dominant group. Within the school context this could occur if students were blocked from possible online friendship groups on the basis of not belonging to a particular ethnic or cultural group.

5. Collective experiences involve the perceptions of the effects of racism on ingroup members. Disparities in the allocation of wealth, socioeconomic status and political power are representative of such discrimination towards a particular racial group. Within a school boarding setting the students of a minority group may be accommodated in the rundown buildings with older or non-existent technology, while the mainstream group are housed in the newer modern buildings with access to the latest equipment. Such an overt imbalance in conditions can become the inadvertent situation for future online taunts.

6. Transgenerational transmission focuses on the historical context of the group. This is stress connected with the inheritance of racism. For example, the school child's parents experienced discrimination so the expectation is that the child will also be a victim of such discrimination, with the added possibility of it migrating to an online environment.

Although all of these types involve an aspect of subjective interpretation, this nevertheless does not diminish the degree of stress that may be experienced by the school child. The child enters a state of hypervigilant arousal, unable to predict when and how often the next cyber attack is likely to occur. The severity of exposure increases the risk likelihood for psychopathology in the school child. While Bevans, Certone and Overstreet (2009) were not considering cyber bullying as their trauma example, they do however advocate early detection of symptomatic responses to a trauma.

Trauma theory offers another framework for understanding the impact of experiences such as neglect, sexual abuse, physical abuse, emotional abuse and being the recipient of bullying behaviour on a child's development and inter-relationships. Specifically, this theory focuses on the importance of addressing the complex effects of trauma and toxic stress. According to Sanchez-Hucles (1999) trauma theory fails to address the accumulated effects of devalued status for ethnic minorities that begins with birth, persists through a lifetime, and carries threats to individuals' well-being even when actual violence is not acted out. Children belonging to visible minorities, or who are new migrants, or refugees are not immune to this devalued status and the possible effects emanating from this.

Clark *et al.,* (1999) proposed a biopsychosocial model of perceived racism and its effects on health outcomes. It is argued that when visible minorities, new migrants, or refugees perceive an environmental stimulus as racist, possible outcomes can include psychological and physiological stress responses, which all have the potential to compromise both mental and physical health, as well as an individual's overall well-being. Some of the possible health outcomes may include anxiety, major depression, hypertension, heart disease, and poor immune functioning. Quite clearly, cyber-

racism aimed at a particular target has the potential to set in motion devastating effects such as some of the health outcomes mentioned above.

Another aspect related to racism is the area of segregation, which has been particularly endemic within American public schools. The percentage mix of different cultural groups in any one school creates the potential for inequalities to occur. According to Kozol (1991) societal and institutional racism is a consequence of chronic underfunding. Such inequalities create a domino effect affecting staff, students, families and the community as a whole. For example, when student's performance on standardized tests is not appropriately normed for their particular ethnic group, this can have huge repercussions in terms of how they may be perceived by the mainstream students, thus creating the risk of cyber racism occurring as a function of their performance on such tests. How this situation is handled by the student victim and the bystanders, be they the teachers, the school executive or the family, can determine the school child's well-being.

Despite the lack of specific theories addressing cyber-racism directly, the theoretical perspectives just discussed do offer insights into the consequences that cyber-racism may have on the school child. The next section will focus on some of the research that has investigated the outcomes of violence which is racially motivated, and the potentially catastrophic outcomes of such violence.

## Outcomes of Racially-Motivated Violence

Racially-motivated violence has traditionally had an overt expression. A cursory examination of the statistics from the United States attests to this serious issue. Eisenbraun's (2007) paper presents some shocking statistics from the National Center for Education Statistics for a one-year period in the United States. In the 1996-1997 school year, there were 11,000 fights or physical attacks in public schools involving weapons; 190,000 attacks without weapons, 115,000 thefts, 7,000 robberies, 98,000 incidences of vandalism and 4000 incidences of rape or other sexual violence (Eisenbraun, 2007). Several years later there was the horrific school shooting at the Columbine High School in Colorado. There are a number of reports that show that school violence in Australia is on the rise too. Doneman (2009) reports that 383 Queensland high-school students were arrested for assault in a one-year period. Unfortunately these are not isolated incidences or one-off occurrences.

There are a number of risk factors that have been associated with school violence. These include gang membership, intolerance towards difference, ethnic background, and minorities as perpetrators of violence (Eisenbraun, 2007; Soriano & Soriano, 1994). For a vast majority of incidents such as vandalism, rape and other sexual assaults, gang membership has been cited as a possible factor. Students believe that it is acceptable to ridicule a peer if there is variation from the norm, and that a potential victim is at least partially to blame for his or her own persecution (Eisenbraun, 2007, p. 463). The larger the number of minority students within a school the more likely the presence of violent crimes. All of these risk factors can be exacerbated when their presence is transported into the virtual environment of cyberspace, given the ongoing and increasingly sophisticated technological advances and affordability of communication devices, and the fact that most 'digital natives' are accessible via smartphone or email 24 hours a day. Naïvely, students viewed the more

traditional forms of bullying as an exercise in "teaching group values; conveying group beliefs and making the victim stronger" (Oliver & Hoover, 1994). This could easily apply to cyber racism. In short, any of the violent outcomes or consequences of bullying which traditionally relied on physical bullying and emotional bullying can now be translated into the extended reach of cyber-space and escalated through cyber-racism.

A Toronto study (Raby, 2004) which interviewed 12 teenage girls about adolescent issues, included one question which asked how adolescence might be experienced differently on the basis of cultural background and race. Below is an example of some of the qualitative information reported in Raby's (2004) study.

> "And there's this one girl, she's new to the school. I think she's from Africa or something, she's really dark. No one wants to talk to her because of that. People walk by her 'oh my god she's so dark!'"

> "I don't really think that's racism. It's just that people think if they hang around with her things are going to be said about them because she's not considered part of the cool group. People don't want to be with her because of the colour group, because of how dark she is kind of thing."

> (Raby, 2004, p. 371)

Even while students denied racism, clear instances of racism were cited. Despite the fact that the students didn't perceive this as racism, a clear lack of understanding of what racism is as well as an inability to take the perspective of the receiver are evident. One could easily imagine how a Facebook comment or a Tweet such as this could be endlessly replicated and retransmitted. Unfortunately the study was not able to provide victim reactions to these so called "just joking around" statements.

Attempts have been made to deal with racism in British schools. It is extremely unfortunate that for some students "being racially harassed is a way of life" (Troyna & Hatcher, 1991, p.17) despite a number of inquiries and school policies. Troyna *et al.,* found that educationists tended to export the problem of racial harassment to somewhere beyond the school gates. Such a denial of the problem increases the space and potential for the proliferation of cyber-racism. Individual racist incidences resulted in the emergence of an array of policies to deal with the issues. Frameworks for analysing racist school incidents were developed but failed to alleviate the occurrence of racial harassment. Troyna *et al.*, (1991) argue that the curriculum should emphasise the importance of tolerance and respect for other cultures as a strategy to prevent racist incidents.

According to Bryan (2012) however, race and racism are often subject to "discursive (mis) representation" (p.1) in formal school curricula. While ostensibly seeking to dispel racist attitudes in students, the discourses of the instructional material used preserve traditional views of race and difference, perpetuate dominant narratives of racial conflict, and reinforce the reification of the term 'race' (p.2). Bryan's research has focused on comparing curricular representations of racial

difference and young people's understandings of race and racism. Students from a Dublin-based, ethnically diverse school provided qualitative data for the study supporting Bryan's position. Quite clearly this aspect deserves further investigation.

Racism in the Australian school context has not always been acknowledged as an issue. In 1998 Western Australia released its anti-racism policy and guidelines for complaint resolution. A qualitative study interviewed a number of white male principals (n=35) from a range of Western Australian schools as to how the policy had impacted their management of the schools (Aveling, 2007). The questions asked focused on "the extent to which the school developed and implemented programmes to promote an understanding of the causes and effects of racism among students and employees and encouraged schools to work towards racial harmony; and the extent to which the school integrated knowledge and perspectives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and people from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds" (Aveling, 2007, p.71). Overwhelmingly, racism was not seen as an issue but was constructed as 'bad behaviour' dealt mainly through other policies such as anti-bullying. Constant denial by school principals means that racism can safely morph into cyber-racism with even less possibility of it being detected or dealt with in any way. For the perpetrators, cyber racism offers anonymity by removing their wrongdoing from the school environment. For the victims it becomes even more difficult for school authorities to intervene on their behalf—even if they want to.

## Conclusion and Future Directions

Studies have shown that cyber-bullying uses different technologies to accomplish the same ends as traditional forms of bullying, and that the bully-victims and perpetrators of cyber-bullying are often those who have engaged in traditional bullying (Li, 2007). Another disturbing possibility is discussed by Beran and Li (2005), whereby cyber-bullying which begins in the virtual world may then expand to include face-to-face bullying. Given that numerous studies have established racism as a major motive for traditional bullying, it is to be expected that traditional forms of racist bullying will transition to the use of new technologies of cyber-bullying, or cyber-racism.

Unfortunately, there appears to be a lack of consensus as to what racism itself is and therefore it is probably premature to consider cyber-racism as a uni-dimensional construct. While a lot has been written about racism in schools there is a miniscule amount of research on cyber-racism. There are references to racist slurs within the cyberbullying literature but cyber-racism per se has not yet had the attention it deserves.

Traditionally the literature on racism has dealt with aspects of the perpetrators. The victim perspective occasionally makes its appearance. It is important that work on cyber-racism makes a concerted effort to investigate both the perpetrator and victim perspectives especially since the internet can easily obscure perpetrators while vastly multiplying their influence on victims. Furthermore, the role of the bystanders is also an interesting avenue to pursue.

Schools are making some progress on the issue of racism. There are a number of proactive initiatives trying to address racism in schools, including Cultural awareness programs, NAIDOC

(National Aborigines and Islanders Day Observance Committee) week, involving indigenous and ethnic community members in school activities, language programmes, international cultural exchanges, and changes in school curriculum. Some argue that these are tokenistic measures and that there is a need for social and institutional changes. Within the school setting, the school hierarchy and its teachers embrace racial equality perspectives. In turn this needs to be supported by parents and the community in order for change to occur. Children require good role models in order for the cycle of racist attitudes and behaviours to be curtailed. It is unfortunate that face-to-face racism has not been eradicated, and that we are a long way off stopping cyber-racism.

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