



The Fear of Critical Race Methodologies

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Abstract

Critical race methodologies (CRM), which prioritise the experiences and knowledge of racialised peoples, have become a useful tool to identify and acknowledge racialised power relations in all aspects of the research process. However, engaging with these methodologies requires researchers to not only move away from western scientific research methodologies, which have historically excluded the knowledges and lived experiences of racialised peoples, but confront the legacy of methodological Whiteness. To explore this further, this article takes a self-reflexive account on why International Non-Governmental Organisations [(I)NGOs], who have a long history of (re)producing harmful images of racialised peoples, fear the adoption of CRM based on this tension. Drawing on Bantu Steve Biko's and Lewis Gordon's conceptualisation of racism, fear and Black Consciousness, this paper argues that CRM should not be seen as an attack on methodological Whiteness, but an opportunity to advocate for a sector-wide introspection on the methodological choices which not only centre on the inclusion of marginalised voices, but recognise the need for a redistribution of power to challenge prevailing hierarchies within (I)NGOs.

Keywords Critical race methodologies · Racisms · Black consciousness · Methodological whiteness · Non-governmental organisations

Résumé

Les méthodologies de la critical race (MCR), qui privilégient les expériences et les connaissances des peuples racialisés, sont devenues un outil utile pour identifier et reconnaître les relations de pouvoir racialisées dans tous les aspects du processus de recherche. Cependant, l'engagement avec ces méthodologies exige des chercheurs non seulement de s'éloigner des méthodologies de recherche scientifique occidentales, qui ont historiquement exclu les connaissances et les vécus des peuples racialisés, mais aussi de confronter l'héritage de la méthodologie de la Whiteness. Cet article propose une réflexion autocritique sur la raison pour laquelle les Organisations

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Non Gouvernementales Internationales [(O)NGI], qui ont une longue histoire de (re) production d'images nuisibles des peuples racialisés, craignent l'adoption des MCR en raison de cette tension. S'appuyant sur la conceptualisation du racisme, de la peur et de la Conscience Noire de Bantu Steve Biko et Lewis Gordon, cet article soutient que les MCR ne devraient pas être vues comme une attaque contre la méthodologie de la Whiteness, mais comme une opportunité de plaider pour une introspection à l'échelle du secteur sur les choix méthodologiques qui ne se centrent pas seulement sur l'inclusion des voix marginalisées, mais reconnaissent la nécessité d'une redistribution du pouvoir pour défier les hiérarchies dominantes au sein des (O)NGI.

Resumen

Las metodologías críticas de la raza (MCR), que priorizan las experiencias y conocimientos de los pueblos racializados, se han convertido en una herramienta útil para identificar y reconocer las relaciones de poder racializadas en todos los aspectos del proceso de investigación. Sin embargo, trabajar con estas metodologías requiere que los investigadores no solo se alejen de las metodologías de investigación científica occidentales, que históricamente han excluido los conocimientos y experiencias vividas de los pueblos racializados, sino que confronten el legado de la Blancura metodológica. Este artículo ofrece una reflexión personal sobre por qué las Organizaciones No Gubernamentales Internacionales [ONG(I)s], que tienen una larga historia de (re) producción de imágenes dañinas de pueblos racializados, temen la adopción de MCR en base a esta tensión. Basándose en la conceptualización del racismo, el miedo y la Conciencia Negra de Bantu Steve Biko y Lewis Gordon, este documento argumenta que MCR no debería ser visto como un ataque a la Blancura metodológica, sino una oportunidad para abogar por una introspección a nivel de sector sobre las elecciones metodológicas que no solo se centran en la inclusión de voces marginadas, sino que reconocen la necesidad de una redistribución del poder para desafiar las jerarquías predominantes dentro de las ONG(I)s.

Introduction

In recent years, following the highly publicised murders of Trayvon Martin, Breonna Taylor and George Floyd,¹ International Non-Governmental Organisations [(I)NGOs], among many organisations, have been made to confront their deep-seated racist practices and colonial histories. Recent public exposés of elitism, racism and colonial behaviour within some of the world's largest (I)NGOs such as Oxfam (O'Neill 2021; Roberts 2019) and Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) (McVeigh 2020), sheds a light on this and the long history many (I)NGOs have in (re)producing harmful and often dehumanising images of racialised peoples (Ademolu 2023; Basil et al. 2008; Lidchi 1999). And in an era of hypervisibility given by the affordances of social media, being called out as racist, especially by notable anti-racism groups and movements such as Black Lives Matter (BLM) and #Charity-SoWhite, not only heightens the possibility of reputational damage and a loss of

¹ And the hundreds more—<https://sayevery.name>.



funding revenues, but brings attention to the culture of White supremacy within (I)NGOs (Cole 2012; Bheeroo et al., 2021). To begin addressing this and explore matters of racism(s), in the plural form more broadly (see Garner 2009; Lorde 1992), (I)NGOs have been conducting research which questions staff attitudes and their media and communications practices. However, in recent years, in my role as an anti-racism consultant, I have witnessed how (I)NGOs have rushed into conducting anti-racism research without a thorough investigation into their methodological choices, as it has been argued that ‘methodology is undeniably the backbone of high-quality and responsible research’ (Van Calster et al. 2021, p. 219). Therefore, determining the right methods to best explain the phenomenon in question is essential. Furthermore, what is also missing from this discussion is the fact that racism is often embedded in many traditional research practices (Clark Goings et al. 2023; Matsui et al. 2020). Traditional research practices, which include conventional western scientific research methodologies, or what Bhambra (2017) defines as ‘methodological Whiteness’: a practice that discounts non-western knowledge for not having any scientific validity. This historical oppression of traditional knowledge systems and the voices of racialised peoples has routinely viewed racialised peoples as objects of research and reduced racialised researchers and scholars to experiential insights rather than the proprietors of knowledge (Chilisa 2012, 2019; Keane et al. 2017; Tuhiwai Smith 1999; Wilson 2008; Zavala 2013). Therefore, a vigilant critique about who and how social reality is constructed through the choice of methodologies is a necessary prerequisite in order to challenge the western research canon which has also been associated with White Supremacy (Ani 1994; Pillow 2000; Ladson-Billings 2000; 2003; Sefa Dei 2005; Malagon et al. 2009; Owusu-Ansah and Mji 2013; Zavala 2013).

In order to explore the embeddedness of these racist parameters within traditional research practices, this article takes a self-reflexive account of the author’s experience in advocating for the use of Critical Race Methodologies (CRM) in anti-racism research by (I)NGOs to address racisms in their visual communications. With CRM being uniquely placed to support research aimed at addressing racisms by centring on the lived experiences and epistemologies, or what Edward Said (1981) referred to as ‘antithetical knowledge’, of racialised peoples and challenging traditional research practices (Solórzano and Yosso 2002; Sefa Dei 2005), this article focuses specifically on how using CRM comes with an unwavering sense of fear due to its confrontation with the western research canon and White Supremacy. Pulling together literature from methodological studies, critical race studies and organisational psychology to identify how fear is expressed through various verbal and non-verbal cues, this article in conjunction with Bantu Steve Biko’s (1978) and Lewis Gordon’s (2022) conceptualisations of fear, racism and Black Consciousness, highlights the embeddedness of maintaining racist methodological practices. The verbal and non-verbal cues are illustrated through some vignettes² from five UK and North American based humanitarian³ (I)NGOs between 2018 and 2023. Through

² Due to the sensitivity and contractual obligation not to disclose the names or identities of the (I)NGOs or their staff, and will remain anonymized throughout the article.

³ These five humanitarian organisations operate in the fields of human rights, international development and humanitarian aid.



this reflection, the article concludes that (I)NGOs not only fear what Beverly Tatum (1997) called the ‘paralysis of fear’, which comes from having an open discussion about racisms, but a fear based on using a methodology that brings uncertainty and unknown outcomes when racialised others are at the centre of the research analysis. While these (I)NGOs acknowledged and initially welcomed the importance of conducting research into racisms, their methodological choices, once challenged, did not reflect this, thus, raising important methodological questions. Namely, CRMs underlying theory, philosophy and association to Critical Race Theory (CRT) (Emba 2021; Duhaney 2022), which exposes the embedded nature and persistence of racism (Bell 1992; Crenshaw et al. 1995; Delgado and Stefancic 2001; Solórzano and Yosso (2002), its association with “decolonising”⁴ methodologies (Barnes 2018; Thambinathan and Kinsella 2021), White Supremacy and the dominance of White normativity (Gordon 2022), as well as the maintenance of ‘methodological Whiteness’. Within this matrix of underexplored methodological questions, it is hoped that this article will contribute to emerging and ongoing methodological debates about anti-racist and “decolonising” research methodologies.

Towards an Anti-racism Research Approach

To justify a shift from conventional western scientific research methodologies or ‘methodological Whiteness’ towards CRM requires a multi-layered understanding of its usefulness for anti-racism research. Firstly, it is important to acknowledge that CRM uses a liberatory and justice-based framework which challenges traditional research paradigms that do not foreground race, racism and intersectionality. In so doing, CRM employs the theoretically grounded approach of CRT to focus on the lived experiences and perspectives of racialised peoples rather than the ‘master narratives’ of White privilege (Solórzano and Yosso 2002, p. 32). Secondly, CRM are predominately rooted in storytelling, which racialised communities value as the method of inquiry against the strict positivist traditions of western scientific research and methodologies (Bernal 2002; Solórzano and Yosso 2002). Thirdly, the hiring of Black, Brown and Indigenous researchers to administer anti-racism research is often seen as a deliberate attempt to reconfigure whose voices and perspectives are better placed to control the research agenda. However, being Black, Brown or Indigenous does not automatically qualify you to be an anti-racist or justice-based researcher who embraces CRM. Personal experience with racism, studying racism outside the western canon and advocating an anti-racist agenda are some of the personal characteristics and attributes needed to ensure that racisms are not embedded in research practices. However, it should be mentioned that this inclusion can also be read as tokenistic rather than equitable. For anti-racism researcher Sefa Dei (2005, p. 2), it is essential for ‘the researcher to critically engage [with] his or her own experience as part of the knowledge search’, illustrating how CRM is a critically reflexive

⁴ The term “decolonising” has been placed within quotation marks to emphasise the overuse, misuse and contested nature of this term which has led to more debate than solutions to address the legacy of colonialism.



methodology. As a Brown researcher of African and European heritage with experience of racism within the (I)NGO sector, I advocate for the use of CRM in anti-racism research as a way of challenging the long-established ethnographic approach of “going native” that encourages outsider observations over the lived experiences and knowledges of those with first-hand experience of racisms. This aligns with the ideas of African-American philosopher Lewis Gordon (1995) who also challenged this standpoint epistemological approach and named it “epistemic colonization”, which sees non-racialised researchers and theorists interpreting the experiences of racialised others, thus preserving methodological Whiteness.

Those that have tried to reject conventional western scientific research methodologies and confront structural racisms in the sector have done so by including the voices and experiences of those affected by racist practices (see: Save the Children’s *The People in the Pictures: Vital perspectives on Save the Children’s image making* (2017); Bonds *Racism, Power and Truth: Experiences of People of Colour in Development* research (2021); and the Association of Chief Executives of Voluntary Organisations (ACEVO) *Warm Words Cold Comfort* report (2023). However, there continues to be a wave of (I)NGOs mimicking the performative actions of corporate organisations which include: the hiring of more Black, Brown and Indigenous staff; setting up Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) working groups; delivering ‘unconscious bias’ training; renewing communications guidelines; and CEOs signing anti-racist statements. While such efforts may not be disingenuous attempts to begin tackling the multilayeredness of racisms, these performative actions act as proxies for deep anti-racist work (see Opoku-Gyimah in Whitehead 2020) and reflect a lack of research into the root causes of racisms.

While the ‘pursuit of anti-racist research raises a host of complex theoretical and methodological issues’ (Sefa Dei 2005, p. 3), exploring these issues is part of the research process when using CRM. For example, with CRM’s theoretical roots tied to CRT, both CRM and CRT have been criticised for their methodological reliance on narratives and other literary techniques from post-structural scholarship. However, such criticisms undermine the importance of many qualitative methodologies that rely on the opinions, perspectives and lived experiences of their research subjects which help us understanding how and why we know what we know and who benefits from us knowing and reproducing it (Hylton 2012). This reproduction of knowledge is also important for locating the social conditions that underpin the power relations within the research process, something that Delgado Bernal (2002) links to White privilege and Eurocentrism. Thus, researchers who conform to the norms of the western research tradition and fail to adequately consider the interests of those they study (see Kouritzin and Nakagawa 2018; Nakagawa 2017; Saini 2012) will find themselves ‘haunted’, to use Avery Gordon’s⁵ terminology, by methodological Whiteness, as they do not acknowledge that racisms can be intrinsically entrenched in many traditional research practices (Clark Goings et al. 2023; Matsui et al. 2020). While all research methods host competing interests, tensions and contradictions, (I)NGOs failing to listen to the experiences and epistemologies of racialised others indicates how racialised and minoritised subjects continue to be

⁵ How past social forces control the present in different and complicated ways.



imperilled by the legacies of colonialism (see Bheeroo, et al. 2021; Brewer 1993; IDC 2022).

Over two decades ago, Māori researcher Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999, p. 1) encapsulated this legacy of colonialism by pointing out why ‘research has become, from the vantage point of the colonized [...] probably one of the dirtiest words in the indigenous world’s vocabulary’. She explained how traditional research processes are deeply problematic due to their ‘imperial and colonial practices’ (ibid, p. 2). Therefore, traditional research practices and processes, and subsequent methodologies, should not be seen as a harmless pursuit of knowledge, but active contributors to the legacies of methodological Whiteness. As it is the collection of knowledge, from beginning to end that can encompass historical power dynamics, racial hierarchies and methodological deficits, all of which can result in erroneous outcomes, such as the performative actions mentioned above. Thus, in order to shift from the exclusionary practices of traditional research methodologies and the extractive nature of research methodologies that have been heavily criticised for their association with racism and coloniality (see Chilisa 2012, 2019; Datta 2018; Igwe et al. 2022; Keikelame and Swartz 2019; Kouritzin and Nakagawa 2018), I argue that researchers and organisations should welcome CRM. However, using CRM should not include the exploitative immaterial labour of racialised people, but the full or co-ownership and authorship of their informational content (see Lazzarato 1996). An issue that Teju Cole (2012) warned us over a decade ago in the *White Saviour Industrial Complex*:

If we are going to interfere in the lives of others, a little due diligence is a minimum requirement [...] There is the idea that those who are being helped ought to be consulted over the matters that concern them (para 1, 11).

It is this due diligence and commitment to equity and justice, which essentially means ‘combating, subverting or examining relationships of power’ within the research process (McKinley et al. 2018, p. 51) that CRM embraces. Therefore, I argue that CRM offers (INGOs a great opportunity to tear off the band aid, which for too long has concealed the deep-seated racist practices historically used in western scientific methodologies. As it is these normative methodologies that have not only dehumanised research subjects, but routinely viewed them as mere pawns rather than creators of knowledge (Kugara et al. 2021). To challenge this inequity, Bernal (1998), who has used a Chicana feminist epistemological framework, deconstructs the traditional ‘researcher’ and ‘researcher subject’ roles in order to develop a more collaborative relationship that recognises the value of research subjects’ knowledge. By resisting traditional methodological frameworks that do not respect the process of how to engage with research subjects, creates what Solórzano and Yosso (2002, p. 23) described as a ‘deficit-informed research that silences and distorts epistemologies of people of color’ or what Baron (2022, p. 132) explicitly summarises as ‘the “muting”, “dissolving” and “stifling” of Black voices, Black concerns, and their agenda’. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak’s (1998) influential essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* provides a cautionary tale of this silencing of racialised and marginalised groups through the notion of epistemic violence. Similar to Gordon’s (1995) conceptualisation of “epistemic colonization”, Spivak’s notion of epistemic



violence, if placed within the context of research methodologies, speaks to the wider structural elements of domination, such as White Supremacy that epistemic violence helps legitimise and that CRM aims to eradicate.

From Denial to Fear: Its all in the Cues

While it may not be instinctive to contextualise methodologies within wider social-political contexts, CRM theoretical attachment to CRT, which analyses racisms above and beyond individual biases and discrimination, is done so through systems such as White Supremacy (Crenshaw et al. 1995). This nexus between CRM and White Supremacy not only exposes the omnipresence of coloniality, power and privilege, but how White Supremacy has institutionalised racisms. For example, in contrast to CRT, the UK government defines racism as a matter of individual prejudice rather than institutional or power laden, which some have argued has been engulfed by a discourse of denial (Elliott-Cooper 2023; Sivanandan 1983). A discourse that Sofia Hamaz (2008) argues has bled into the public imagination and framed how many (I)NGOs approach and tackle racisms. This influence, given the government's history of research which has failed to address matters of racisms, and who have been criticised for denying the existence of institutional racism⁶ [see *Scarman report* (1981),⁷ the *Macpherson Report* (1999)⁸ and the *Commission on Race and Ethnic Disparities* (2021)], should be a cause for concern. Even more so because their methodological choices were found to carry a number of methodology mistakes (Olusoga 2021). Mistakes which resulted in a number harmful policies being implemented due to the lack of consultation with the community, and of historical, economic and political context (Brake and Hale 1991; Gillborn et al. 2022). However, it is possible that these methodological mistakes were in fact not mistakes but intentional defence mechanisms to protect themselves from the fear of the unknown. As declaring that institutional racism exists, requires organisations to hear some unwelcomed truths, and unlike methodological Whiteness, CRM acts as a catalyst to facilitate the telling of unwelcome truths.

Scholars such as Shari and Nagdeee (2022, pp. 7–8) make a case for how ‘recognising racism empirically is not necessarily the same as understanding it analytically [as] “naming” racism may be cathartic, but it is not conclusive’. This critique of acknowledging racism offers valuable insights into the role emotions play into how organisations approach research about institutional and systemic racism and the methods they choose to address it. For example, Shari and Nagdeee identify how feelings of uncertainty and fear, following the rise in anti-racism movements in the

⁶ The Macpherson Report was the only one which acknowledged institutional racism.

⁷ Scarman report was an investigation commissioned by the UK Government into the Brixton Uprising (aka Brixton Riots) that saw parts of the African-Caribbean community rise up against deep seated social and economic problems directly impacting them due to institutional and systemic racism by government forces.

⁸ A UK Government report which found that racism was a central factor in the failure of the Metropolitan police investigation into the murder of Black teenager Stephen Lawrence in 1993.



UK, have led the government to encourage organisations, especially civic institutions and NGOs to employ racialised minorities as part of the ‘domestication’ process which again acts as a proxy for any deep anti-racism work. This influence over NGOs organisational actions not only reflects the point that Hamaz (2008) raised above, but how feelings and emotions can lead to ineffectual outcomes. Fear in particular, as conceptualised by Lewis Gordon (2022) in *Fear of Black Consciousness* explores this by using the historical characteristics of ‘White consciousness’ and White supremacy that are imbued in neurosis, narcissism, egotism and pleonexia. Gordon uses these four mental conditions to explain how they drive a current of fear and guilt about the collective responsibility Whites have had over racism and the fear of ‘their own irrelevance’ (ibid, p. 163). This link between emotions and the influence over behaviour and decisions, especially under conditions of uncertainty and strategic change (Elfenbein 2007; Huy 2010) is an important one. As according to Van Knippenberg and Van Kleef (2016), fear can be characterised by shared emotions and norms within organisations in an effort to influence employees’ emotions, particularly when they too are faced with uncertain or unfamiliar situations. This collective response to fear, reflects what Wrenn (2013, p. 387) discusses in *Fear and Institutions*:

As part of the system justification process, individuals legitimize their surrounding institutional context by rationalizing the status quo. Experiments also show that individuals are more willing to engage in the stereotyping of others in the justification of a system that sustains inequality as a means of justifying the hierarchy.

What Wrenn offers using system justification theory are the coping mechanisms that individuals employ when faced with uncertainty and anxiety, and the ‘human compulsion to defend the present system’ (ibid). This individual and collective response to serve a psychologically palliative function at the expense of disadvantaging others, reconfirms the types of behaviours that have been present in conventional western scientific methodologies which have historically oppressed traditional knowledge systems as well as the experiences and epistemologies of racialised communities. System justification theory, therefore, provides certain individuals with a dual identity of being supporters and victims of a system, which creates these divisions and hierarchies between groups, and as a result disparages them to change their position on certain issues such as the adoption of CRM.

In order to understand how fear towards CRM is expressed by (I)NGOs, I draw from organisational psychology to help provide an explanation; as psychologists argue that emotions elicit various expressive cues that communicate certain messages, which can be recognised by others (Elfenbein 2023). For example, during meetings with predominately White senior management teams who oversaw the anti-racism research that I was hired to conduct, various verbal and non-verbal cues such as facial expressions, vocal tone, body movement and physical distance (Dovidio et al. 2002; Hall et al. 2019), were characterised by different reactions associated with fear such as anxiety, avoidance and self-protective responses like becoming defensive (Bellini, et al. 2022; Sieber and Stanley 1988) when CRM was introduced. This was demonstrated by an incident that involved a staff member who routinely



raised their tone and spoke over me when I introduced the rationale as to why they should adopt CRM. Even when I was giving my own personal experiences as a racialised woman as to the importance of having my experience and opinions heard, I was interrupted on a number of occasions by a senior White female staff member as a way of dismissing my perspective. Upon reflection, this experience of undermining my personal experience and professional opinion, reminded me of Frankenberg's research (1993) *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness*, where she explored the discursive behaviour of well-intentioned White women, who feared public exposure of racism and unspoken racial hierarchies; and Goldberg's (1990) reading of interruptions, which can be synonymous with power. Namely, the power to control the conversation and deflect alternatives ideas. This exclusion of racialised voices and opinions reminds me of James Baldwin's claim that 'Whiteness is just a metaphor for power'.⁹ As it is the power to control what is said and by whom which mirrors the continued legacy of racial hierarchies that methodological Whiteness and (I)NGOs have been accustomed to.¹⁰ This incident illustrated two impediments towards the adoption of CRM. First, how the production of White racial hegemony deflects any forms of justice which CRM entails, and second, how these staff members feared the possibility of hearing 'unwelcome truths' from the racialised research subjects and the personal emotional labour that comes with facing these 'unwelcome truths'. Tatum (1997) calls this a 'paralysis of fear', which comes from having an open discussion about racism. However, in a recent report by Dr Lingayah (2023, p. 10) titled *Warm Words Cold Comfort: UK Civil society's ongoing racism problem*, Lingayah highlights how institutional change towards racisms will depend on a willingness to 'undertake the hard emotional labour that moving towards anti-racism and race equity entails'. This type of emotional labour is at the heart of CRM, as it not only asks people to relive past emotional incidents and experiences, but invites organisations to 'identify, challenge, and change the values, structures, and behaviours that perpetuate systemic racism' (Sefa Dei 2005, p. 3). This emotional labour can be unsettling for both research subjects and (I)NGOs, but without researching into these lived experiences and valuing their epistemologies and hearing some 'unwelcome truths,' (I)NGOs run the risk of not knowing the 'who', 'what' and 'why' racism continues to exist, which is crucial if they want to analytically understand and conclusively tackle racism.

Uncomfortable silences were another emotional cue I observed to acknowledge their unwillingness to adopt CRM especially when CRT was mentioned. This included (I)NGO staff members failing to acknowledge the discursive construction of racisms. For example, on one occasion, two staff members from one (I)NGO refused to recognise the rationale and importance of using the word 'murder' to describe the fatal demise of George Floyd instead of 'death' during the interviews with supporters. This denial that George Floyd was murdered was not only an illustration of how racism can be carried through language, but a personal devaluing of racialised peoples lives. Nevertheless, I made a case by arguing that not using the

⁹ From the 2016 film *I Am Not Your Negro*.

¹⁰ See Bonds and Inwood (2016, p. 720) who argue that this is rooted in White supremacy which has become the 'central organizing logic of western modernity'.



word ‘murder’ offered (I)NGO supporters who were being interviewed an escape from the intensity and reality that racism presents. And it is this centring of white comfort which left me feeling frustrated and my opinions ignored as they prioritised their feelings over addressing the racial equity and racism. Moreover, this neglect of dismissing how racism is created within and through language, helps maintain methodological Whiteness by failing to acknowledge the intricate role race plays in the structuring and understanding of the world, and of the ways, it is legitimised (Bhambra 2017). In response to my explanation, a defensive justification of the terminology ensued which involved staff members looking away from me and towards each other to gain some form of collective comfort and response. Gordon (1995) describes this behaviour as neurotic or ‘bad faith’ when White people deny reality for the sake of holding onto a view of reality that comforts their ego; and he goes on to argue that, escaping personal distress by choosing to ignore evidence that runs counter to their beliefs, underlies the phenomenon of anti-Black racism, something that I witnessed through this continuous centring of white comfort.

“White is Right”

Among all these unspoken cues, there has been this unsaid reality that authority and knowledge are rarely questioned when you are White (Bandyopadhyay and Patil 2017; Redfield 2012). For South African anti-apartheid activist Steve Biko (1978), this privileging of White ideas, perspectives and experiences not only had a devastating effect on eradicating other knowledges, but placed racialised others in inferior positions. Such racial hierarchies are visible in the contemporary (I)NGO apparatus, and deeply woven into the everyday social fabrics of the sector (see Bian 2022). Something that I argue is transferred into the everyday choices which were made when selecting their methodologies. As it is this form of racial subordination which is reimagined to maintain certain privileges, something which Biko (1978, p. 65) argued could be linked to those who revel in the status quo¹¹:

Being white possesses the natural passport to the exclusive pool of white privileges [...] Yet at the back of his mind is a constant reminder that he is quite comfortable as things stand and therefore should not bother about change.

A change which I found increasingly present in discussions I had with (I)NGOs who were sceptical of using CRM because it entailed surrendering certain privileges; namely, disrupting the use of methodologies that were all too familiar in their everyday social experiences. By privileging the methodological choices by senior White management teams, (I)NGOs were able to maintain their privileges as the owners and creators of knowledge and the overseers of outcomes. Outcomes which spun a positive light on the research data by distorting the interpretation of results and

¹¹ Worth reading Sara Ahmed’s (2012) book *‘On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life’*, where she shows how diversity is another tool of white supremacy and, thus, does nothing but maintain the status quo.



misleading readers into believing there was little to no racism with the (I)NGO in the final report.

In Biko's analysis of White privilege (1978, p. 20) this reflects the historical legacy of 'Black people being under a white direction' and White liberals, in my case (I)NGOs, believing they 'knew what was good for the blacks'. There were often moments when I felt under this 'white direction'. For example, I would not be invited to meetings or staff would ignore my emails, creating what Dovidio et al. (2002) and Hall et al. (2019) described as physical distance, as a means of controlling the direction of the research and limiting the presence of 'unwelcome truths' from racialised peoples. This ontological framing of racial hierarchies describes an unspoken reality which Gordon (2022, p. 29) defines as 'white is right'. From the devaluing of racialised people's stories as valid data to the undermining of my personal experience and professional opinion in anti-racism research, I argue that Biko's notion of a natural passport to white privileges was maintained.

For Gordon (2022, p. 29), White supremacy which is centred around this 'White normativity', not only positions Whiteness as the standard racial norm, but as a social, political and scientific one. Scientific Whiteness, analogous to western scientific research has had a detrimental effect on CRM, as CRM is generally seen to be outside the social scientific traditions of research, or even an esoteric methodology which sits in direct contrast to methodological Whiteness. In the same way that White supremacy operates, methodological Whiteness also denies the role race plays in the structuring of reality. Conflicts would often arise when a senior White staff member from the management team would push for questions in the survey design that decentred race. This preservation of White normativity and the undermining of CRM, which centres race, reflects what was confirmed in the UK government's House of Commons Committee report (2022) titled *Racism in the aid sector*, which highlighted the dominance of White staff at senior levels mirroring the historical power relationships of colonialism. When vocalising this observation during meetings, I was met with more defensive reactions; this time through aggressively justifying their position and choice to decentre race by explaining how many White staff had lived and worked in African states. Believing that they could empathise with Black experiences, reflects what Biko (1978, p. 19) defined as White liberals having 'Black souls in White skins.' However, by doing so they failed to acknowledge the complex place privilege occupies and how that, in and of itself, fed into the methodological choices they made and imposed.

In opposition to using the term White privilege, Gordon (2022) provides an alternative concept—'white licence': which he construed as giving a person permission to perform racist work without fear of punishment or reprisal. I associate this lack of fear within the (I)NGO sector based on the legacy of rarely being questioned (Bandyopadhyay and Patil 2017; Redfield 2012) and the universal assumption that (I)NGOs are the 'blameless agents of benevolence' (Godrej 2014, para 1). (I)NGOs and their staff have a long and protected history of being seen as 'doing good,' or what Biko (1978, p. 20) defined as 'do-gooders', and this has given them leverage, or Gordon's 'white licence' to maintain the status quo. However, one of Biko's central claims was that Whites can only sympathise with the oppression of racialised others, and therefore, should not be the one's driving the anti-racist agenda as they are often



driven or influenced by dominant White power structures and superiority complexes, which Gordon (2022) describes as White supremacy that are firmly lodged in existing power dynamics. As seen in the examples above, poor methodological choices have led to poor decisions, outcomes and furthered inequalities. And through the domestication of racialised minorities in these spaces, they too have become entangled in the dominant White power structures which are controlling the direction of travel when it comes to anti-racism research rather than being open to new methodologies which challenge these dominant White power structures. An entanglement which Kherbaoui and Aronson (2021, p. 269) see as ‘reifying historical inequities by continuing to maintain white control over Black, Indigenous, and People of Colour (BIPOC) through a complex system of predominantly white-led initiatives rooted in the preservation of dependence and powerlessness’. However, some racialised peoples are no longer staying silent about institutional racism (Ali and Romain Murphy 2020; Gordon 2022) which is forcing (I)NGO to confront these historical inequities and fear some of the uncertainties that comes with adopting CRM.

The Rise in Black Consciousness

Above and beyond the historical inequities which emerged as a result of White supremacy, privilege and power structures, the recent Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests have led (I)NGOs to address racism at an unprecedented speed, and this has brought with it a resurrection of the Black Consciousness movement. Seen as a movement of solidarity and mutual identification between racialised and minoritised peoples in the fight against racism and oppression by White structures (Biko 1978), White Supremacy is now perceived to be under threat, as it is finally being ‘seen through the eyes of Blacks’ (Gordon 2022, p. 19). This idea of being seen through the eyes of Blacks’ is reinforced through the philosophy of Black Consciousness, which for Gordon is based on Black existentialism¹² and follows a long Black intellectual tradition that intentionally distinguishes between lowercase and uppercase Black consciousness, which sees Black people committed to fighting oppression (uppercase), rather than recognising Black people as victims of racism (lowercase). For Biko (1978, p. 48) Black consciousness, based on the pioneering work of sociologist and Pan-Africanist activist W. E. B. Du Bois and political philosopher Frantz Fanon¹³ is about having a mental attitude committed to emancipation against “forces that seek to use your blackness as a stamp that marks you out as a subservient being”.

While Biko is very clear that Black consciousness is not a methodology, he argues how Whites ‘want to be barometers by which the rest of the white society can measure feelings in the black world’ (ibid, p. 51). This control over understanding the ethos and the feelings of the Black experience is testament to how the (I)NGOs

¹² Gordon’s philosophy of Black existentialism is presented as a philosophical alternative to European existentialism and used as a means of exploring the lived experiences of Black people especially when addressing inequity, racialization, and historical oppression.

¹³ Other influences came from Leopold Senghor, Sekou Toure, Airne Caesar, and Julius Nyerere.



that I have worked with routinely measure the lived experiences of racialised others. The barometers of feelings and bias towards racialised groups have been used by social psychologists for decades (Fiske 1998) which have ranged from the Aversive Racism Measure (Dovidio et al. 1986) whereby ‘well-intentioned Whites avoid the possibility of their own potential racism, both by explicitly denying it and by avoiding interracial contact, which makes them uncomfortable’ (Fiske and North 2014, p. 699), to the Symbolic Racism Scale (Henry and Sears 2009), which measures threats to Whites’ personal lives resulting in racial antipathy, and the Social Dominance Orientation model (Pratto et al. 1994) that measures group hierarchies, which some people argue are natural, unavoidable, and desirable. However, these methodological barometers lack what Biko (1978) describes as an ‘inward-looking process’, which requires Whites to acknowledge their complicity in racism and oppression. Embracing CRM offers the opportunity to be self-reflective, by analytically listening and understanding why and how racisms have become normalised, and to some extent, invisibilised through the experiences and counter-narratives of racially minoritised people (Dixson and Rousseau 2005). These counter-narratives are what Gordon describes as Black people rising up against oppression by ‘talking back’, to use Hooks’ (1989) term, to dominant White power structures. Thus, reversing Biko’s (1978, p. 20) observation of White consciousness which saw ‘whites doing all the talking and the blacks the listening’. However, when I or the racialised interviewees ‘talked back’ and criticised the role (I)NGOs played in the creation of racisms and oppression through their visual communications, fear and anxiety would follow. Felt through the need to reassure senior management that a possible loss of privilege, reputational damage and funding revenue is a consequence of doing the right thing by racialised peoples, self-protective responses were emitted and characterised by limiting what responses were included in the final report.

Therefore, for CRM to work, (I)NGOs must not fear what is said when racialised others express an opinion during interviews, focus groups or surveys, but become what Rowe et al. (2015, p. 297) describe as an ‘allied other’ through the art of listening and unselfish understanding (Fromm 1994). This form of unselfish understanding is about breaking away from the dominant White normative idea that ‘white is right’ (Gordon 2022) to one that is based on a human capacity for empathy. This was demonstrated when two (I)NGOs made the decision to separate staff members based on their racial characteristics. I would interview racialised staff and my White collaborators would interview non-racialised staff. While it has often been argued that racialised peoples feel more comfortable speaking about racisms with someone of a similar ethnicity and who is likely to have experienced racisms rather with those who had not.; this methodological choice and arrangement did not address the fear non-racialised groups had when speaking to me about racisms or the interracial contact which made them feel uncomfortable. This discomfort and fear illustrates how CRM requires time, something that many (I)NGOs did not have, which I felt was a major deficit to the overall research outcome and adds to Solórzano and Yosso’s (2002) definition of a deficit-informed research.



(Un)learning Methodological Whiteness

In order to shift from the ‘white is right’ paralysis embedded in research methodologies and the fear of Black Consciousness, CRM brings into question the action of unlearning methodological Whiteness. A research framework and praxis defined by Bhabra (2017, para 4) as:

reflecting on the world that fails to acknowledge the role played by race in the very structuring of that world, and of the ways in which knowledge is constructed and legitimated within it. It fails to recognize the dominance of “Whiteness” as anything other than the standard state of affairs and treats a limited perspective—that deriving from White experience—as a universal perspective.

This encounter of ‘Whiteness’ goes beyond centring racialised perspectives as a methodological practice, to one of critical reflexivity. By accepting that the construction of knowledge can be produced outside dominant White structures and knowledge centres requires accepting other lived experiences as legitimate sources of knowledge (Palaganas et al. 2017). In doing so, there needs to be a move away from Solórzano and Yosso’s (2002) deficit-informed research, which has universalised White knowledge, perspectives, and experience. However, the fear, unwillingness and resistance by (I)NGOs to change their methodological practices inevitably provokes various feelings of discomfort. Often displayed during meetings by less smiling, less positivity, and gaze aversion (Dovidio et al. 2002; Hall et al. 2019), demonstrates what Hook (2005, p. 17) defines as ‘disavowal’ or ‘contradiction management’, which is when people believe they hold non-racist views yet their behaviour can be seen as racist. This was displayed when questioning whose experiences and knowledge we (de)value, and who are the “experts” in knowledge production. While it was not my intention to antagonise (I)NGO staff, it was clear from their self-protective responses which included looking away and showing surprised facial expressions when mentioning the words “(de)value” and “experts” that they were not familiar with racialised people challenge their authority and positionality. And given the inherent imbalance between existing power holders of knowledge, and those who have historically been marginalised or silenced in the process of generating new knowledge, it is possible to argue that these so-called “experts” are imbricated in the system of ‘White Supremacy’ that both Gordon and Biko refers to, and which (I)NGOs are not excluded from. Hutton and Cappellini (2022, p. 155) exert in their research on epistemic (in)justice that there is a danger that maintaining the status quo is allowing these ‘dominant disciplines and scientific methods [to] exert considerable epistemic influence in knowledge production’. Similar to the protracted ‘paradigmatic revolution’ against epistemicide by racialised academics (Stanfield 1985, p. 411), (I)NGOs must also unlearn methodological Whiteness in order to become ‘epistemically disobedient’ (Mignolo 2017), where they de-link themselves from the dominant White knowledge systems to help change ‘the terms of the conversation’ (Mignolo 2011, p. 50). By way of illustration, some (I)NGOs were using what corporates define as ‘deep dives’—a methodological approach that takes an



intense and in-depth analysis of racism in order to explore its root causes. However, this increasingly common methodological approach used by (I)NGOs to identify and correct racist past wrongs are theoretically and methodologically inapt. Firstly, deep dives were established by a Global Design & Innovation Company (IDEO) for rapid product development and growth not tackling racisms, and secondly, they fail to tackle the multiple layers of imperial and colonial practices that Tuhiwai Smith (1999) refers to earlier. Therefore, in order to be open to other methodologies and knowledges outside of the European-North American axis, (I)NGOs need to (un)learn the ways of seeing lived experiences and epistemologies from racialised others as a threat, irrelevant or inferior. While this can, and does create fear among those who have been accustomed to this methodological practice, and often benefited from this type of knowledge creation, without disruption, their understanding of racism will remain unchanged as they are unable to see through the eyes of Blacks'. Despite some efforts by (I)NGOs, there is still a fear of incorporating methods that can disrupt the status quo, and being collaborators or co-designers of knowledge (Itchuaqiyag and Matheson 2021), is no longer enough. (I)NGOs must relinquish their research traditions and socio-historical contexts, which only validate White knowledge systems, as dismantling racist practices and processes requires dismantling 'White supremacy' within the research process, which has been sustained by the 'epistemological ignorance of race' (Mills 2007). Thus, anti-racism research carried out by (I)NGOs should be centred on an anti-racist agenda that endeavours to (re)construct a more critical approach which has an unwavering commitment to the pursuit of social justice as a guiding methodological principle. Without it, research remains racially unmarked. In other words, methodologies which sit within the structures of White supremacy, allows racialised differences and racisms to remain intact. And this could explain why little, after decades of implementing equity and diversity policies to address racisms, has changed. The methods which one chooses to conduct anti-racism research, and the questions that are asked, should not be seen as simply tools to provide legitimacy, but question the distribution of organisational power, in order to address the racial hierarchies that have been historically lodged into these processes.

Towards a Conclusion

When we speak we are afraid our words will not be heard or welcomed. But when we are silent, we are still afraid. So, it is better to speak
(Audre Lorde 1978)¹⁴

This article attempts to reveal how (I)NGOs are only willing to go so far when it comes to embracing CRM in order to address racisms. Steeped in fear of what CRM offers, (I)NGOs through avoidance, defensiveness and silence, feel threatened by the rise of Black consciousnesses, which advocates for racialised and marginalised people to be listened to. A fear which could result in a loss of privilege, reputational

¹⁴ From the poem 'A Litany for Survival'.



damage and funding revenue, but ultimately a complete reimagining of the way research is conducted and whose voices are valued. While recent protests and public reaction to the continued deaths of racialised others are testament to the commitment and renewed interest that (I)NGOs have in fighting racism; their starting point with carrying out research should be a never-ending conversation between the past and the present. CRM should not be feared, but seen as an opportunity to move beyond merely documenting racial disparities based on cathartic expressions in order to demand for a more conclusive and analytically robust narrative that leads to the broadening of knowledge, and a social justice mandate that guides the research process.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The author declares that they have no conflicts of interest.

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