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## Race as stigma: positioning the stigmatized as agents, not objects

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## **Race as stigma: Positioning the stigmatised as agents, not objects.**

### **Running title: Race as stigma.**

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#### **Abstract**

Using material from 3 qualitative studies into the social and psychological consequences of racism, this paper explores the insights gained from conceptualising race as stigma. Not only does this shed light on the construction and contestation of racism in the lives of the research participants, the material presented raises important issues for a social psychology of stigma more generally. These include an assessment of the embodiment of stigma, the ideological construction of stigma within particular histories, the impact of stigma on identity, and the ways in which we collectively contest and resist stigma. While acknowledging how stigma, particularly the stigma of race, acts to deny humanity, agency and liberty, I illustrate how stigma is collectively constructed, institutionalised and resisted in social and political relations. I conclude that a crucial part of the psychology of stigma must be a focus on the possibilities for communities to contest and transform representations and practices that stigmatise; that is, we need to explore the possibilities and conditions for stigmatised communities as agents as not (only) as objects or victims of stigma.

#### **Key words:**

Stigma, racism, social structures, social representations, embodiment, ideology, identity, resistance, community, agency.

### **Race as stigma: positioning the stigmatised as agents, not objects.**

Race is a stigma (Goffman, 1968). Conceptualising race in this way not only sheds light on the operation and contestation of racism, but promotes a critical social psychology of stigma that highlights the ways in which stigma operates to produce and defend structural inequalities. Defining race as stigma is useful in different ways. First, it highlights the embodiment of race: race is seen in or on the body; while race may inform social spaces, linguistic styles and fashion, it is primarily linked to the body, or more particularly the skin (Fanon, 1952). In ancient Greece a stigma was a mark - burnt or cut into the skin to symbolise the threat or danger of the so stigmatised person.

Secondly, conceptualising race as stigma underlines the dehumanising nature of discourses and practices that 'race'. Goffman asserted that stigma reduced the person "from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one" (1968, p. 3). Similarly we shall see how race reduces the identity and the potential of those seen as 'raced': they are spoiled or blemished by the racist gaze. Those who are positioned as 'racial others' – those with black and brown skin are seen as less than, different from, unequal to the racialising, normatively white, others. In this way race invades the self as racialised expectations and stereotypes mark one's sense of self, one's own expectations, ambitions and fears (Fanon, 1952).

Thirdly, the operation of race can only be understood in relation to its material contexts of unequal relations of power (Miles, 1989). Like the stigmas of mental illness, HIV/AIDS and disability, race is something that produces and sustains material inequalities and is anchored in histories of prejudice, exclusion and poverty. Race generates its significance and its power from its particular histories of domination, colonisation and global economics. It is not 'simply there' as a system of cognitive categorisation (Aboud, 1988), something pre- or non- discursive. Race is constituted in and through structural relations of power and oppression, and can only be made sense of with reference to these very material histories.

Fourthly, race exists as a stigma in the eye of the beholder; it is something that is imposed on others and so it often jars with their claimed identity and sense of self. Hence the stigma of race leads to misrecognition in non-dialogical encounters as racialised others are not seen as we see

our selves<sup>1</sup>. This creates tension, a potential space of struggle and negotiation where those stigmatised as ‘raced’ collaborate ways to challenge stigmatising representations and so reject or at least disrupt the ideology of racism. This is not a matter of naively ‘thinking oneself’ out of the structural realities of racism, but it is a matter of mobilising collective anti-racist projects and building social and political resistance.

This paper shall examine race as stigma, illustrating this argument with material from three qualitative studies into the social and psychological consequences of ‘race’: a) the Brixton study, a study of representations of and identities in a stigmatised community (Howarth, 2002); b) the exclusion study, a study of the role of racialising representations in children’s experience of exclusion from school (Howarth, 2004); c) the whiteness study, children’s representations of racism in a predominantly white primary school (Howarth, under revision). All three studies used a mixture of focus groups, interviews and participant observation, included adults and young people between 8 and 16 years and were conducted in England between 1997 and 2005. To provide a meta-analysis of the three studies here is perhaps too ambitious, but examined together they reveal commonalities about the construction and experience of ‘race’ in contemporary Britain, particularly as lived by teenagers in the multicultural communities of the Midlands and the South East of England. All three sets of data highlight the dialectics between identity and representation, the remarkably constant character of racism across these contexts, and the collective possibilities of resistance and social change.

While the focus of my discussion here is the operation of race as stigma, there are important parallels that could be made to the study of all forms of stigma, such as health, disability, HIV/AIDS, sexuality and class. Hence, this discussion is useful for a critical social psychology of stigma: proposing connections between embodiment, history, identity and resistance in the construction and contestation of stigmatising practices of all kinds. I shall take each of these aspects of stigma in turn. My aim is to show that a psychology of stigma needs to place the material and political realities of stigma at its heart. In order to develop this, I will first detail the theoretical perspective that invites a rigorously historical and political analysis of the psychological – the theory of Social Representations, SRT (Moscovici, 1984).

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<sup>1</sup> In different points in this paper I use ‘we’ when referring to those racialised. This is not to claim a position or voice as racialised (being a white woman this is problematic). Instead it is to unsettle the otherising dynamics contained with the positions ‘us’ and ‘them’ and the often unspoken assumption that ‘we’ are white and ‘they’ are racialised.

## **Social Representations: a theory of practice, participation and change**

Addressing the psychological processes involved in the construction and contestation of stigma is a dangerous task, as it is easy to fall into an overly cognitive or reductionist analysis and relegate stigma (and attempts to subvert it) to the realm of the symbolic. I propose that SRT offers a way out of this by engaging with the fundamentally collective or inter-subjective nature of the symbolic and theorising representations as systems of practice, participation and change.

To put it simply, social representations are “ways of world making” (Moscovici, 1988, p. 231). The theory looks at how different knowledge systems are produced, defended, contested and transformed in everyday encounters, social spaces, relationships and positionings. Hence it shows up the fundamentally *collective* and *ongoing* (re)production of meaning and social relations. It insists on a dialectical understanding to the connections between the psychological and the political – examining both how the knowledge we collaboratively produce today is embedded in our collective and competing histories and is simultaneously reworked, resisted and transformed as we find new ways of ‘mastering’ our constantly changing realities (Moscovici, 1984). It shows how the psychological is *framed* but not completely determined by the historical and the material, and so allows a space for possibility, for participation and for change.

As Moscovici has stated, “individuals and groups, far from being passive receptors, think for themselves, produce and ceaselessly communicate their own specific representations and solutions to the questions they set themselves which have a decisive impact on their social relations, their choices” (1984, p. 16). Because representation is seen as a *product* of thought, dialogue and practice and as a *process* that enables communication, debate, innovation and resistance – conflict and social change are at the centre of the theory. As social representations are “always in the making, in the context of interrelations and action that themselves are always in the making” (Moscovici, 1988, p. 219), they have the potential to be continuously re-worked, re-made and resisted. What is crucial, as I emphasise in the sections below on the embodiment of stigma and the histories of ‘race’, is that both the operation as well as the resistance of representations are fundamentally collective and so political projects.

### **Embodied stigma**

“The Greeks ... originated the term stigma to refer to bodily signs designed to expose something unusual and bad about the moral status of the signifier” (Goffman, 1968, p. 11). This has very

specific effects for how the stigmatised body is literally seen and treated. Because the stigma appears 'real', visible on the body of the stigmatised, the social construction of stigma and the symbolic violence of stigma are often obscured. This is very true for the stigma of race. Race appears as 'real', defining particular bodies as 'raced' – as it can be seen on the body. Hence the stigma of race appears non-negotiable. Take this example from the exclusion study, where Monica, a black British woman is describing her experiences of prejudice at primary school in London.

Monica: And prejudiced I mean by - I tried to do good by them (her white school teachers) and one of them, who is the English teacher, she dropped her handkerchief one day and I saw it and I picked it up and I gave it to her. And in front of me, she literally rubbed her hands - her fingers on her skirt and I asked her why was she doing that, 'was my hands dirty?' And she said, no. She said "you touched me so I need to wipe my hands". And I didn't quite understand. I was very upset and from that day I felt I couldn't do anything right by her.

Monica, now in her 50s, was recounting something that had happened 40 years ago – and yet the confusion, pain and anger of a young child realising that her skin marks her as different, as dirty, as possibly polluting or contagious was still very evident. Fear of bodily contact is a common theme across the research I refer to here; in the Brixton study children claimed that people from "more white places" could be afraid to visit Brixton as "they are not used to the mix" (Danielle, Black British); in the whiteness study, Asian children narrated how their white friends were told they would "catch our colour" and "get into trouble" if they sat together at school (Jessica, British Pakistani). What is painful about these accounts is the realisation that the stigma of race is marked on the body and embodied in ways of being seen, being treated, being feared as different. The psychological violence of stigma is this reduction, this lessening, this capturing of all possible ways of being to a limited few – tied to and contained within the body and beyond the reach of the stigmatised to define herself as she sees herself (hooks, 1992).

The stigma of race is real because it can be seen, and is dangerous and so should be rejected. Implied is the idea that, as Goffman (1968) has put it, "a blemished person, ritually polluted, is to be avoided, especially in public places" (p. 11). As stigma is marked on the body, stigmatised bodies have to be policed, controlled or excluded in particularly ways in order to minimise the threat of such. Black British boys, aged 11 and 12 years, in the Brixton study give examples of this:

Cliff: Say one of us was to walk into the shop, only black, they go like 'one at a time!', 'One at a time', yeah, and they will stand there and watch you. You don't, you feel like you done

something wrong, cos they are standing there and looking at you, and you are trying to buy something.

Connor: I tell you what gets on my nerves, yeah, when they let white people, or Indian people, yeah, they let them in there loads, then the black person -

Malcolm: He says 'Two at a time!'

Connor: 'Wait outside', yeah, 'Two at a time' to the black people, like they are going to steal something.

The stigmatising representation of black youth as untrustworthy and criminal (Hall, 1997) pervades these boys' everyday encounters – as they see that they - or more precisely their skin is seen and treated in a particular way. This happens in the context of the street, shops, schools and employment – and leads to elaborate systems of social exclusion and marginalisation. This is most clear in the exclusions study, representations that race filtered into the symbolic and material curricula at school and led to the actual exclusion (expulsion) of children positioned as other (Crozier, 2005). Stigmatising representations, as all representations, are more than ways of seeing or cognitive maps: they filter into, and so construct, the institutionalised practices of differentiation, division and discrimination (Howarth, 2006).

### **Histories of stigma**

The stigma of race, therefore, has to be placed into a historical and political context to be understood fully; that is, as Parker and Aggleton (2003) have powerfully argued, we need to examine how stigma is intimately tied to the reproduction of social difference and social exclusion. The representation of black youth as criminal, for example, is anchored in histories of the racialisation of poverty, exclusion and policing (Miles, 1989). Contemporary racist images remain tied to bloody histories of colonial relations, slavery, the denigration and economic exploitation of particular cultures. The classic studies of Hovland and Sears (1940) on the lynchings of blacks by whites in the Southern states of America, for example, demonstrated that history and economics (tangibly here the price of cotton) play a crucial role in the enactment of racist discourses and racist murder. Jahoda (1999) has argued that we need a comprehensive historical analysis of racism to understand why animality is the “key image” in the stigmatisation of black people over centuries and “the one that has survived most stubbornly” (p. 244).<sup>2</sup> It is

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<sup>2</sup> Neither Jahoda or myself are arguing that animality is not also a central image for stigmas of other kinds; clearly it is also salient in stigmatising representations of people living with disability and HIV/AIDS. Douglas (1966) has detailed how animality operates as a means of otherising and maintaining boundaries between purity and danger, the civilised and the savage, the human and the non-human. Jahoda's point is that in representations that race images of the non-human appear to be most resistant to changes in the operation of racism across context and time.

evident in all three studies. Black and mixed heritage girls, aged 11 – 12 year, in the Brixton study are very aware of such stereotypes<sup>3</sup>.

Pauline: You know where all the crowds are in Brixton? Right, that's where they are going to build a hotel for the tourists that are coming from all over the world to see Brixton, and that's even going to cause even more troubles.

Katrina: People won't like that.

Caroline: Why not?

Pauline: It's like they are in a zoo and people are just there watching them -

Danielle: - their behaviour like they are zoo animals or mad.

Caroline: So is that true? Are they building a hotel?

Louise: Yeah, because that's what people think of us, they think of us as animals, and we're not animals.

Caroline: Right. ... Who thinks of you as animals?

Louise: That's what some people say.

Katrina: Some people say 'you nig nogs', 'why don't you go back on your banana boat', 'back to where you came from' and everything.

Louise: And they call us 'animals'.

Sam: And they call us 'black niggers'.

It is clear these children know that black communities are objectified and exoticised. They feel "looked on", as they say, positioned as other and as different. But these children probably do not know that there was a time when black people were exhibited in museums, zoos and places of entertainment. Even as recently as 1997, a stuffed Bechuana tribesman was displayed in the museum of the Catalan town of Banyoles (Jahoda, 1999). White people's fascination with black people, our fear of difference and the horrifying extent of our racism<sup>4</sup>, have been passed down through the ages, preserved in cultural artefacts and continue to stigmatise the identities of black youth today. The material consequences of this were very evident in the exclusions study where representations of race incorporated racist beliefs about human development that associate whiteness with superior intellectual capabilities and blackness with physical strength and sexual prowess (Hall, 1997). For instance, a Black British teaching assistant remembered his own experience of school:

Winston: I was pushed into sport and drama at school, when what I was good at was maths and science, because of all these ideas that all black people can do is, you know, dance and run.

For many, the stigma of race can have devastating consequences for black and other ethnic minority students in Britain - namely in leading to considerably lower levels of attainment in

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<sup>3</sup> Caroline is the interviewer.

<sup>4</sup> 'Our' is used here to highlight my own positioning as a white academic.

terms of qualifications and higher levels of school exclusion (Crozier, 2005; Ofsted, 2002). In turn this leads to higher levels of unemployment, increased vulnerability to health problems, higher numbers involved with the police and criminal justice system and so reproduces racial exclusion and class stratification (Stambach and Crow Becker, 2006). Stigma therefore often works as a system of legitimisation and justification for social inequalities and relations of domination and subordination (Parker and Aggleton, 2003).

### **Collaborating resistance**

One way of avoiding the social inequalities that many stigmas incur is to try to hide the stigma, to prevent it being observed by others and so to ‘pass’ undetected (Goffman, 1968). While it is difficult to ‘pass’ as white if one has non-white skin and heritage, I found examples of this in all three studies. Take Monica, whom we met above, recounting how she used to bleach her skin:

Monica: There were times I wanted to - , I felt I wish I was white. There were times I felt that way and there are times where I felt positive about being black and there are times I feel when the chips are down, I felt I wish I was white because maybe it would be easier. And there was a time when in this country I did use a bleaching cream (*laughs*) and it was, it was in the in-thing, it was sold, they’re still being sold now but not as much because I think certain laws have come in with regard to that because it could damage your skin. But I remember 20 years ago it was like the in-thing and I thought if I could be slightly fairer, not white, but slightly fairer, it would make life better for me in terms of work. And I was using this cream religiously everyday, ...Alright, it took at least three years to get back to normal.

The psychological weight of such stigma, as well as the structural conditions of marginality produced by stigma, mean that “the ability of oppressed, marginalized and stigmatized individuals or groups to resist the forces that discriminate against them is limited” (Parker and Aggleton, 2003, p. 18). Equally, we need to be careful of over-stating the extent of this. Crocker and Quinn (1998) provide a comprehensive review of studies of stigma documenting that “people engage in a wide variety of strategies to maintain, protect and enhance their self-esteem” (p. 518). What is paramount is that these strategies are fundamentally *social psychological*, that is, they are collaborative, they cannot be achieved alone and they have to be developed in dialogue with others.

Social groups threatened by the stigma of difference may collaborate similar strategies to transform stigma; this includes acutely dissimilar marginalised groups (such as the deaf, the gay community and white supremacists as illustrated by Berbrier, 2002). This means that there is room to unsettle, challenge and potentially transform the representations and practices that

stigmatise. While racialising representations pose a threat to identity and esteem, as we have seen, our psychological capabilities, our collective potential for dialogue, debate and critique, gives us the possibilities to become *agents not objects* of the stigma of race and so “counter the seduction of images that threaten to dehumanise” (hooks, 1992, p. 6).

Collaborative strategies aimed at limiting the damage of racialising representations were evident in all three studies. School activities and community projects that attempted to challenge the operation of racism and support children at risk of racialised exclusion appeared to protect children from the damaging effects of stigma. These projects encouraged strong relationships between families, community groups and schools and provided a forum for people at risk from stigma to come together, debate and develop a strong sense of relationship, identity, support and resistance. For example, in the Brixton study, a deputy-head teacher<sup>5</sup> detailed her school’s attempts to challenge racialising assumptions about history, promote detailed knowledge of the pupils’ multicultural British communities and encourage confident identities:

Deputy Head: It’s very important to give our pupils every opportunity to rise above the obstacles society sometimes puts in their way. And what we believe is that, as a Christian school, every single pupil is valued, and every pupil is obviously very precious, and therefore we have to affirm them for what they are, and obviously their cultural identity is very important. This means we discuss racism, multiculturalism and so we affirm at every opportunity. ... So, for example, when they are dealing with 2nd World War, they will deal with the 2nd World War, but we will also make it quite clear that there were large, um, numbers of people who came from the Caribbean, who came from Africa who played their part, the Indian Army was the largest army sort of in the world that fought largely attacking another continent to it. So that they actually realise that their history also played, that their grandfathers or whatever had a very important part in the 2nd World War. (*Pause*) So they do not to fall into any ‘us’ and ‘them’ idea of history. They become um, really quite conscious about their identity, particularly as young black women, um, and I think that it’s to do with the level of consciousness and the level of pride they have in themselves.

Striking examples of community participation and collective resistance against racialising representations were found in the exclusions study, mainly in the form of black supplementary schools. These demonstrate the importance of social relationships and ‘community dialogues’ where young black people discuss the impact of racism, ways of challenging it and so co-

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<sup>5</sup> This school has been commended by OFSTED for such initiatives, developing a very inclusive ethos and the very high standards it achieves in terms of attainment and talent (Ofsted, 2002).

construct more empowering versions of their communities and so of themselves. As Tola, British Nigerian, aged 15, explained:

Tola: without the Saturday school – the teachers there, I don't think I would have bothered. ... I would have just accepted it, ok – I'm excluded now, that's it, that's me. Right? But they gave me another chance, and they made me think about being black. I'll show them now, I can do it.

Such forums can be seen as “supportive collectivities where negative experiences can be shared and processed” (Rastas, 2005, p. 158). They provide a social and psychological space where people can develop collective strategies to challenge the operation of stigma in their lives. Relationship, debate and community, therefore, can provide the social support and psychological resources to ‘reconstrue’ threats to identity (Breakwell, 1996). As self-identity emerges intersubjectively, against the backdrop of the ‘generalised other’ (Mead, 1934), an individual cannot develop the confidence and the emotional strength to challenge stigma alone. In the context of HIV-AIDS and health promotion, this is the reason peer education, group counselling programmes and ‘community dialogues’ are strongly advocated (Campbell, 2004).

While we have seen the debilitating damage that race as stigma causes the human psyche, we also need to explore the conditions for problematising and transforming representations that threaten to limit or fracture the possibilities of identity, agency and community. Such an exploration needs to recognise that the material, historical and institutional dimensions of stigma are inextricably interconnected. Community mobilisation and community participation projects need to be seen in their political contexts – where various interests compete in ways that may limit the success of any interventions (Parker and Aggleton, 2003). As stigma develops from and maintains relations of inequality, attempts to challenge stigma will be highly contested.

## **Conclusion**

Hall (1997) has asked: “Can a dominant regime of representation be challenged, contested or changed?” (p. 269). While various studies of stigma do examine the coping strategies available to the stigmatised (Miller and Kaiser, 2001), we need to go further and ask: can a dominant regime of stigma be challenged, contested and changed? I would suggest that there has been an over-emphasis on the perceptions of the stigmatising or on the psychological damage of stigma and not enough attention given to the *social psychological* conditions for challenging stigma from insiders’ perspectives, as Sayce (1998) has also pointed out in relation to stigmatising representations of mental health. It is likely that this is a product of an overly individualising

psychology: one that focuses on the psychological mechanisms and the psychological outcomes of stigma. Consequently research into stigma does not often explore the possibilities for communities to challenge and transform the operation and effects of stigmatising representations and practices.

This is contentious, as it could be seen to argue that the stigmatised need to take responsibility for bearing the very real psychological and material consequences of stigma; that is they can and should 'think themselves' out of stigma, here racism. This would support a conservative psychology that "tries to change the individual while preserving the social order, or, in the best of cases, generating the illusion that, perhaps as the individual changes, so will the social order" (Aron and Corne, 1994, p. 37). This is not what I am arguing. Resisting stigma can only be a collective enterprise – and something located within very particular circumstances, reliant on resources, support and collective will. It is equally important we do not overstate the case that stigma cannot be resisted, disrupted and even transformed. Such an analysis would collude with stigmatising representations that position the stigmatised as 'object', as passive, as victim, leave the social inequalities of stigma intact and so deny the real human capacities of dialogue, debate and agency.

In order to avoid this, I would suggest, we need a perspective that reaches beyond the purely cognitive level by addressing the material, the historical and political nature of stigma, and explores the conditions and possibilities for re-asserting identity, agency and social change in stigmatizing relationships. I have attempted to introduce such an approach in this short paper; I have examined stigma as an embodied, historical and contested co-production, with particular attention to the operation and contestation of racism. We have seen that race works as a 'stigma theory' (Goffman, 1968) that privileges, denigrates and excludes particular bodies, spaces and practices in ways that inform, reflect and limit our negotiated identities. We are not passive in this, however: collectively, in relationship and dialogue with others, we find ways of proposing identities and so contesting stigma. Stigma is as much about the resistance of identities as the reduction of identities; it is a dialectical process of contestation and creativity that is simultaneously anchored in and limited by the structures of history, economics and power. Hence, a rigorous *social psychology* of stigma needs to connect the psychological to the political by theorising stigma as much more than a psychological construct: stigma needs to be seen as collectively constructed, institutionalised and resisted in the systems of difference, privilege and inequality that constitute the social structures and institutionalised practices of any society.

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