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Future directions for a critical social psychology of racism/antiracism

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Future directions for a critical social psychology of racism/antiracism

Derek Hook & Caroline Howarth

In devising the call for papers for this special issue (and for the two symposia which formed part of its preparatory work[1]) we had deliberately framed our objectives with the proposition '*towards* a critical social psychology of racism' – an indication that such a version of critical psychology had yet to be attained. Despite the important contributions we have assembled here, and the many useful conversations we've shared with colleagues since beginning this project, the goal of attaining a definitive critical social psychology of racism remains elusive. There are many reasons for this, some of which stem from a disciplinary history of social psychology that has at times viewed overtly political discourse - much like issues of cultural-historical contextualization - as anathema to good science. Another reason that might be cited here is the often impoverished notion of 'social' that qualifies social psychology: a 'social' which all too often may be collapsed into the analytical frame of individualizing psychological humanism (Farr, 1996; Moscovici, 1972).

Aside from these considerations, there is another reason why a definitive critical social psychology of racism and antiracism cannot, *and should not*, be 'finally' reached. An obvious consideration in this respect is the multiple permutations of historical forms of racism that require the ongoing generation of new analytical frames, new modes of intervention that will not simply be completed, 'finalised'. Another consideration is that a critical social psychology of racism and antiracism is best served by a field of *multiple types of analysis, enquiry, debate and involvement* (Riggs and Augoustinos, this issue). To speak of having attained a definitive critical social psychology of racism seems, to

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[1] The first of these was held in Cape Town on the 20th June at the *International Society for Theoretical Psychology Conference*, the second in Durban on 29th June at *Beyond the Pale International Critical Psychology Conference.*

us, to point to a homogenization of methodological and theoretical perspectives that is the exact opposite of our goals here. The last thing that a critical social psychology of racism should aim at is the entrenchment of an orthodoxy of methods, perspectives, approaches: for a social formation as multifaceted and historically-variable as racism, we benefit from as much conceptual, political and analytical richness as we are able to provoke.

A critical social psychology of racism and antiracism then will never be complete, just as it will never be wholly singular, or cohesive, at least not in the sense of being impervious to argumentation and debate. It is in this spirit, of camaraderie, debate, innovation and collaboration that we wish to offer some reflections on future possible directions for a critical social psychology of racism and antiracism that we hope will never attain a definitive or singular status.

Different modes of writing: opposing 'regimes of whiteness'

It is by no means incidental that at the beginning of their paper Kirkwood, Liu & Weatherall make reference to a work of fiction, namely Toni Morrison's (1999) *Paradise.* Our point here is not so much to emphasize the illustrative role of fiction - which we can agree is often exemplary - but to consider the political utility of making reference to a different epistemological domain to that of the social sciences. Clearly different 'rules of truth' apply in the world of fiction to those which structure and condition what we can say and/or write in the institutionalised settings of social scientific discourse. Different things can be said, different statements, positionings, imaginings, modes of self-reflection can be managed here than might be accommodated within the stricter truth-conditions of, say, mainstream disciplinary social psychology.

This in itself may strike us as a less than striking formulation; the pertinence of such a distinction is best grasped in view of the pervasiveness of particular formations

of 'whiteness', 'whiteness' that is not only as an insidious category of psychic investment through which particular histories of privilege are consolidated (as documented in this special issue), but also as an epistemic principle, that is, as subtle (and sometimes less than subtle) precondition of knowledge, belonging, authority, rationality, moral rightness, and so on. Here we are pointing to the role of whiteness as an ordering principle of knowledge, or, perhaps more directly yet to the multiple veils of white racism which conditions and structures the truth-value of subjectivity.

We might put this in a different way, by pointing to the pervasiveness of those knowledge-systems, institutional structures, concentrations of wealth, and modes of self-reflection that maintain strong historical ties to an imperial and colonial past. We have in mind here Kopano Ratele's (2005) discussion – which itself draws on Toni Morrison - of the problems of 'speaking one's self' as a black subject in a post-apartheid setting without making reference to those words, themes and concepts that locate one as a subject who is *always secondary to a given racial designation*. This is a problem that Achille Mbembe (2002) takes up in the prioritization he places on what he terms 'African modes of self-writing', that is, the making possible of certain relations to history, narration and authority which are able to acknowledge the harsh facticity of colonial racism and yet to do so in a way which does not lock such African authors into a secondary relation to Western (or white) structures of meanings and identity. This is also a theme of Fanon's, and is perhaps the element that makes sections of *Black Skin White Masks* (1952) so difficult: the fact that in avoiding the assimilation of the master discourse of white culture he needs to fashion a new hybrid language of critique, one which emerges as an often unsettling mix of personal reminiscences, autobiographical anecdotes, philosophical and literary reflections. It is often neglected, in fact, the degree to which sections of *Black Skin White Mask* are based on literary forms of analysis, on the discussion of fictional treatments of colonial themes.

The point to be made here is simply this: if the social sciences disciplines from which we speak are themselves subject to regimes of knowledge which serve 'whiteness' – a case that is made, in a slightly different manner, in much of Edward Said's work, notably so in the case of *Orientalism* (1978) – then it becomes important to investigate different modes of writing, different modes of self-reflection than those regularized by the disciplinary social science history that we so often find ourselves subject to. This, clearly, is not to forego traditional social psychological investigation, or social scientific scholarship more generally. It is though to point to the limits of our ideological imagination within such domains, and to ask ourselves what can be imagined and said outside of such frames of intelligibility, and what the analytics of a critical social psychology of racism and antiracism might learn from them. [2]

Resistance psychology, phenomenological analysis and the everyday

Such terms of outside reference (the domains of fiction and popular culture) are able to put us into a different relation to moments of everyday experience than can be expected from many current social psychological methods; here we resonate with Durrheim and Dixon's complaints about the lack of a suitable critical register for accommodating just such terms of everyday experience. Clearly we are not recommending exclusive reference to the domain of fiction here; in so far as the project is that of capturing the terms of everyday experience – which, contrary to what is asserted by many discourse theorists, is not simply superceded by governing structures of discourse – we might refer to a range of historical documents of everyday life (see Highmore, 2002), to autobiography as method, or to a variety of community

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[2] Paul Gilroy's (2000) extended reflections on the works of Ralph Ellison and Richard Wright make for an interesting case in point here, as does Homi Bhabha's (1994) extended engagement with Toni Morrison and Salman Rushdie; in both cases fictional works are as important to the work of conceptualizing resistance as are more overtly scholarly or analytical texts.

psychological methods such as 'photo-voice' (see Lykes, TerreBlanche & Hamber (2003) which aim to capture such moments, images and narratives. Here it is also worth consulting Hayes (2004), who asserts the importance of a 'critical psychology of everyday life' and offers a biting critique of how psychology typically produces a view of an abstract individual cut off from the concrete materiality of everyday life.

This is not simply an argument about an impossibly abstracted (and, not incidentally, an *insidiously raced*) version of subjectivity that then comes to be generalized in much social psychological thinking. It is an argument about how the world of everyday experience opens up moments of contradiction, juxtaposition and reformulation. Consider for example Said's (1993) notion of contrapuntal experience along with Du Bois' (1989) notion of double consciousness; these are moments of reflection and critique which emerge from the ordinary contexts of everyday experience. Here one might also make mention of the Black Consciousness Movement, one aspect of which was the attempt to connect the smallest and most 'apolitical' facet of daily experience to larger facts of oppression, solidarity and opposition (Biko, 1978). Such moments of everyday reformulation and critique, we would argue, are one means of complimenting and developing the argumentative resources advanced by both Green & Sonn and by Kirkwood, Liu & Weatherall as crucial aspects of an antiracist agenda.

Another example of such a 'resistance psychology' is worth noting here: Chabanyi Manganyi's (1973) often autobiographical anti-apartheid text: *Being-black-in-the-world.* This text shares with Fanon's *Black Skin White Masks* a commitment to a phenomenological mode of analysis, which, to be certain, does not necessarily consign one to a depoliticized, perceptual, psycho- existential frame, as seems often to be assumed by proponents of social constructionist/discursive approaches (Painter, 2005). Moreover, such a perspective is also one that pushes the powerfully embodied nature of "race" and racism – a critical imperative, as emphasized by Riggs &

Augoustinos (this issue) - to the very forefront of analytical scrutiny. Here one only needs recall Fanon's (1952) pained and frequently lyrical, indeed, *poetic* attempts to illustrate the more visceral devices of racism in a materialist language of corporeal experience. [3] This gives us cause to reflect on whether Social Psychology often seems stuck in the perspective of its current methodological preferences. Despite the obvious pertinence of Durrheim and Dixon's commentary on the limitations of current social psychological instruments – which are certainly pertinent - we would suggest that the history of the discipline does offer one prospective set of tools – a politically applied form of phenomenological analysis, perhaps in the model supplied by Manganyi (1973) - that may well be up to the task of capturing the embodied, spatio-temporal practices of everyday lived experiences.

Subjects before subjectivity

The body itself of course, along with questions of the psychology of embodiment – and questions of embodied racialized experience – deserves far greater attention within critical psychological perspectives on racism, as Riggs & Augoustinos make clear in their paper, particularly in their emphasis on epidermalization. Here then another Fanonian problematic, usefully extended and discussed by Gilroy (2000): the heightened bodily sense of 'the getting under the skin' of racial bodily markers which succeed in 'overdetermining' the subject 'from without'. This sense of how bodily attributes come to exert a determining influence on how identity is assembled within specific socio-historical co-ordinates is particularly pertinent: it disrupts the ascendancy of a particular psychologistic mode of explanation that presumes an individual subject *existing prior to* the constitutive force of social, material, bodily factors.

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[3] For a recent existentialist-phenomenological account that involves an incisive component of bodily analysis, see Gordon (1997). For a more psychoanalytic treatment of the same themes, see Clarke (2002).

In Fanon's dedication to these factors – each of which we would argue is worth more sustained attention in an antiracist critical social psychology - we have three instances (the social, the bodily, materiality) in which psychology cannot be said to pre-empt factors of subjectification. Riggs & Augoustinos make just such an argument in their paper, pointing to a series of formative conditions – principally the subject's placement in a cultural, historical and political order which precedes them – formative conditions which underlie and substantiate certain lines of privilege and ways of knowing, and from which 'whiteness' is all too quick to disassociate itself. Individualizing psychological humanism by contrast would attempt to understand the person not as subject to these forces of constitution, but rather as able to transcend them. Here we need to refer back to the fabrication of the interior/exterior distinction that Butler (1997) speaks of, and indeed, the importance of grasping the psychic internalisation of norms reiterated by Riggs & Augoustinos, to comprehend the quickness of the white subject's disavowal of the racism that is so constitutive of the discursive category 'whiteness'. (In this instance, so long as 'whiteness' is never divorced from the structural racist relations that have conditioned its emergence, whiteness studies does pose itself as a viable ally for a critical social psychology of racism).

If it is the case that subjectification precedes psychological subjectivity – and the most rudimentary themes of Marxist and poststructuralist analysis suggest it is - then we cannot presume an autonomous psychological individual above and beyond social/material forces which constitute their subject-hood. For this reason critical social psychological forms of analysis need to be *more* multi-disciplinary, *more* multi-perspectival than has traditionally been the case. Whereas historically, social psychology has been quite willing to align itself with scientific and quantitative methodological means, it has been far more tentative in its willingness to align itself with current developments in social/cultural theory, the humanities, or literary studies

(the almost complete absence of postcolonial criticism within contemporary social psychology is a case in point). This, we would argue, is not a viable route forward for a critical social psychology of racism/antiracism, which can only benefit from the exploration of those points of overlap shared by social psychology, critical social studies, social history and so on. Here it is worth pointing out that a critical social psychology of racism requires, as its necessary corollary, a social psychology of multiculturalism (as intimated in the introduction to this issue). Some of the most interesting examples of work in this area – Said's (2003) thoughts on cosmopolitanism, Gilroy's writing on multiculturalism after empire (2004) and planetary humanism (2000), even Hardt & Negri's (2005) recent musings on mass resistance to contemporary conditions of empire, *Multitude* – clearly stem from outside the disciplinary domain of psychology.

The argument for inter-disciplinary collaboration can be made even more strongly: if an adequate critical engagement with racism requires a far more committed engagement with the forces of subjectification as mentioned above (those means of subjectification that predate the psychological subject) then we *must* look outside of standard psychological modes of analysis; to not do so would be to fail to apprehend what Butler refers to as the 'psychic life of power'.

Conclusion

Several points might be made here then, in response both to under-utilized avenues for critical social psychology and in respect of how it may more effectively link produce a form of resistance psychology. The first is simply to assert that as critical social psychologists we should feel less trepidation at the possibility of reference to the realms of fiction, biography, popular culture and everyday experience than commonly seems the case. Some of the most vital currents in contemporary cultural studies – the analytical usefulness in particular of notions such as performativity, hybridity and

mimicry, habitus and field (for a succinct overview of related concepts see McRobbie, 2005) - appear to have gone almost totally under-utilized in social psychology, a discipline which all too often appears to prefer disciplinary isolation to the prospects of collaboration with cultural and social theorists, or to vital terms of reference provided by literary or aesthetic domains (the work of Brown (2001), is a welcome exception to this rule). One might be forgiven for assuming that the cultural turn – clearly such a fulcrum of critique in the work of luminaries such as Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy – had passed social psychology by completely, and with it – disturbingly – a series of possibilities for resistance. The prospect of such collaborations between social psychological and social/cultural theoretical perspectives affords us the opportunity to grasp something of the interplay between subjectification and psychological subjectivity; this is something which for many – us included – must be considered an indispensable part of an antiracist agenda.

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