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Running head: abuse in local contexts

Harry, Paul and the Filipino maid: racial and sexual abuse in local contexts

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Abstract

Estacio argues for critical health psychology to take action to address three issues, namely racist humour, the media and health; human rights abuses against domestic workers, and third world poverty and labour migration, all raised (unintentionally) in the 'Harry and Paul' sketch recently broadcast on British television. It is suggested that in its attempt at humour, the sketch offensively reflected and reproduced patterns of social injustice that are far from funny. We argue here that a focus on the interactional elements of the sketch through micro level analysis provides an understanding of how in everyday contexts Filipino workers are constructed in terms that are socially unjust and of how abuse can be justified. This understanding usefully complements broader study of the issues and can allow critical health psychology to make a distinctive contribution to these topics.

Keywords: racism; sexism; abuse; local context; membership categorization analysis

Estacio (this issue) draws our attention to three topics relating to public health on a global scale, namely racist humour, the media and health; human rights abuses against domestic workers, and third world poverty and labour migration. There is no need to rehearse here the arguments that she makes concerning these topics, nor the evidence that is offered in support of her arguments; the case for addressing such matters is a compelling one. The conclusion that she provides is one that most, if not all, critical health psychologists would share, in that critical health psychology should look to facilitate social action on the side of those whose health and well-being are adversely affected by the inequalities of the social processes that are operating. Arguably, only by doing so, can critical health psychology as a pluralistic approach contribute meaningfully to the promotion of public health for those on the receiving end of social injustices, as proposed by Hepworth (2006).

In addition to detailing these three broad issues, Estacio requires us to consider one specific instance in which such issues recently became especially relevant, namely the 'Harry and Paul' sketch broadcast by the British Broadcasting Corporation on 26 September 2008. She argues that this sketch, offered ostensibly by way of humour, exposed to public scrutiny the issues that she details and, moreover, did so in a way that was offensive in inviting people to laugh at matters that are far from humorous. In presenting racism under the guise of humour, it is suggested that the media (re)produce the racist values or discourse prevailing more widely throughout society. This particular sketch can thus be viewed, regardless of any attempt at humour, as an example of practices that perpetuate existing social inequalities and underpin the experiences of those who find themselves in situations of suffering.

Let us make it clear at this point that we share Estacio's concerns as to the issues of public health that she describes which affect many of the world's population.

We similarly agree that these topics do not make for humour, and that the presentation of major social inequalities in terms that make light of the difficult lived experiences of many people does lead to offence. There are however two questions raised by Estacio's arguments that we would suggest merit further consideration. The first relates to the role of critical health psychologists in relation to these matters.

Certainly, we can add our voices to those of many others who draw to public attention the effects of current social practices upon the oppressed and who call for action to address social injustices. That is no bad thing. The question though is what more precisely critical health psychology might contribute *as* critical health psychology, i.e. does it have something distinctive to say that differs from the (potential) contributions of other disciplines? The second question relates to the particular instance of the 'Harry and Paul' sketch and what it does in relation specifically to the issues being discussed. The sketch does potentially make relevant the three topics that Estacio details but these are by no means the only issues of potential relevance. For example, the description 'you useless bloody Northerner' could easily be taken also to be offensive, both in its own terms and as referring to regional inequalities in health and well-being. The question arises therefore of what more precisely it is that makes the sketch particularly offensive in its treatment of Filipino workers rather than in respect of other matters.

The answers to these two questions, we argue, are linked. It is certainly pertinent to our understanding of such issues to consider the broad patterns of social injustice to which Estacio refers and the possible upstream influences on these patterns. This examination however should not come at the cost of neglecting the local contexts within which the injustices and their consequences come into play (McVittie, 2006). Within each set of figures for racist behaviour and human rights

abuse lie instances of individual experience, lived by those concerned not as exemplars of more general social difficulties but as extreme personal circumstances of difficulty. In this respect, the 'Harry and Paul' sketch, while a fictional instance of such circumstances, does offer an opportunity for more detailed consideration of at least some of the elements that potentially are of relevance in individual encounters of this sort.

In returning to the sketch itself, we take as our focus the interactional nature of the exchange between the characters involved. Understanding the interactional elements requires a rather more fine-grained form of analysis than the Foucauldian discourse analytic approach cited by Estacio; discourse analysis of course spans a wide diversity of approaches (McKinlay & McVittie, 2008) and we propose here that greater attention to the micro aspects of discourse in use can pay dividends. For reasons of space, we do not here reproduce the transcript of the sketch nor indeed produce a more detailed transcription as might be expected to form the basis for conducting fine-grained analysis. Instead, the reader is referred to the transcript provided by Estacio. Nor indeed can we here provide a full analysis of the rich detail of this interaction. We therefore confine ourselves to a number of analytic observations of the talk, proceeding primarily on the basis of membership categorization analysis (Sacks, 1992; Schegloff, 2007). From this perspective interest lies in the ways in which individuals themselves deploy and make sense of social categories in talk and how such categories are taken up, reworked or otherwise treated by other parties to the interaction. Our attention is thus drawn to the details of the interaction itself, to the speakers' categories, and to the emergent consequences rather than to broader patterns, no matter how obvious these patterns might appear to the analyst.

Applying this perspective to the 'Harry and Paul' sketch immediately focuses our attention on three aspects of the interaction between the fictional characters as depicted. The first of these is the choice of categories in use. Speakers always have available to them a choice of categories from which to make a selection, with the selected option then being developed as interaction progresses to accomplish interactional goals. Here, the description provided is that of 'their Filipino maid'. Now, this description immediately defines members of the category in various ways, suggesting that they are migrants to the United Kingdom, that they are engaged in domestic work, and that they belong to other people. When taken together with the description of the speaker's actions 'see if we can mate', a description more commonly applied to an action of people in relation to domestic animals or livestock, this categorization functions to construct category members as not being autonomous human agents in their own right. A second aspect of the interaction that is worthy of note is the actions that are attributed to the girl as a category member, and which thus become category-bound attributes. The girl is described throughout the interaction as engaging in activities that are hearable as being sexually related ('gyrates', 'caressed his arm', 'tapped her hips and wiggled'). These activities she carries out in accordance with the instructions of the speaker, Mr Lovelock, who has set up the encounter. The girl is thus presented as being compliant in performing the sexually-related activities required of her by others. Moreover, we see a third aspect of the interaction in which particular motivations are ascribed to the female character. Here, it is suggested that she engages in the actions that are described not simply through obedience to the demands of others but rather as a result of a willingness and desire to engage in sexual activities. She is described as having 'walked seductively' and uttering the words 'so sexy', and as 'looking upset' following the unsuccessful

encounter with Clive. Finally she is described as walking off with the postman following 'leering' behaviour on his part and a brief comment made to her. All such descriptions point to a desire to be engaged in sexual activity, whether with the initially proposed partner or with another available partner, indicating a somewhat indiscriminate sexual readiness on the part of the girl.

Taken together, the three features of the sketch outlined above construct the Filipino maid as being subservient to the demands of others, as engaging in sexually related activities when called upon to do and as being indiscriminate in her sexual desires and choices. What we see, then, is how this particular and offensive construction of Filipino migrant workers arises not simply as a consequence of discourses or shared social understandings that are located elsewhere and which become reflected in specific instances. Rather than being a reflection of broad patterns of inequality and discrimination, this interaction can be viewed as an enactment of racism and sexism, comprising one piece of a broader picture of abuse.

We do, of course, accept that this interaction is a fictional one; it does not necessarily resemble closely other, naturally occurring, instances such as those detailed by Estacio. The elements found here will not necessarily correspond exactly to those found in such cases. Nonetheless, careful examination of the detail found in this sketch does provide us with some useful understanding of what might be found in detailed study of particular instances of abuse. For example, Billig (2001; 2002) notes that alleged humour that draws upon extreme forms of prejudice is closely linked to expressions of that prejudice in that both share the same meta-discourse of inequality and accountability for that inequality. The features found here in a supposedly humorous example of abuse thus offer us useful insights into the ways in which the abuse of Filipino workers (or indeed other migrant workers) can be accomplished in a



diversity of everyday experiences and potentially accounted for by reference to the attributes, actions and desires of Filipino workers themselves. Writ large, the construction of abuse in this particular sketch points to how abuse can be an outcome of the everyday interactions of many who find themselves in situations of inequality.

This returns us to the question of what critical health psychology might contribute to the study of such issues. Certainly, we as critical health psychologists, can acknowledge and draw attention to the broad patterns of social inequality and injustice that persist across the globe. At the same time however, we should be alert to the fact that such broad patterns comprise multiple individual instances of the abuse of individual people, for whom personal abuse in the here and now is a somewhat more pressing concern than being one of many unfortunate individuals who share broadly similar difficulties. What critical health psychology as a pluralistic approach, but only as a pluralistic approach, can offer is an understanding of how the local contexts of abuse are inextricably linked to the global picture. Addressing matters of abuse requires us not just to take action in response to distasteful media coverage of the issues, or to point to the depth of prevailing constructions that disadvantage particular groups across the globe, but also at the local interactional level to promote action that will reject or challenge rather than acquiesce in or succumb to unfavourable constructions of Filipino workers and others. The challenge for CHP therefore surely is to find ways not simply of intervening on behalf of the oppressed to challenge media representations of such matters but also to intervene with the oppressed; to empower them on an everyday basis to challenge the ways in which they are constructed, and to be able to negotiate different ways of being that acknowledge them as individuals and as people with full human rights. In this way,

through the deployment of the full range of tools at its disposal, critical health psychology has the potential to make a distinctive contribution to such matters.

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