

# White elephant: 'Race' in higher education social sciences classrooms in the West Midlands of England

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White Elephant: 'race' in Higher Education Social Sciences classrooms in the West Midlands of England by Dr Gill Cressey

## **Introduction**

This chapter is about the interactions that take place within multiracial higher education groups in England. It focuses on social psychology of intergroup relations; analysis of the operation of racialized boundaries (Anthias and Yuval Davis 1992); and roles of students and lecturers in mediating these. Interpretation is offered of how group categories are used in practice by staff and students, consciously or unconsciously, in Higher Education in England. There is a popular expression in English describing a big issue or atmosphere present in a situation but not acknowledged or mentioned: 'the elephant in the room'. Whiteness is obviously core to the historically and socially constructed discourse of 'race'. 'Race' is a construct producing issues that are always in the room but frequently silent and avoided; hence the choice of title 'White elephant'.

## **Contested Multiculturalism in the United Kingdom**

On one level, describing the United Kingdom as multicultural is merely a statement of fact. The U.K. has been composed of several nations (England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales) and has been made up of a diverse range of cultures and identities for decades due to the legacy of British colonialism and imperialism. Following the 1939-1945 Second World War, Britain actively recruited personnel from colonies and ex-colonies to meet a labour shortage. These workers settled and were joined by their families; they formed the first generation of minority communities that now include third, fourth and fifth generations. Since then immigration has continued, bringing economic migrants, students, refugees and relatives of migrants to Britain from all over the world.

On another level, multiculturalism is a much debated and contested ideological project that, broadly speaking, involves the recognition, acceptance and valuing of all cultures and the promotion of mutual understanding between them. Multiculturalism is a political perspective on cultural diversity and interplay of different cultures that celebrates the creative opportunities of people from diverse

cultural traditions interacting with each other and living in vibrant, culturally mixed neighbourhoods or working together in institutions such as schools and universities. Such cross-cultural interactions foster stimulating learning environments and mirror an increasingly globalised world.

Ideologically multiculturalism allows and includes distinct cultural and religious groups, with equal status. State multiculturalism is an attempt to make this acceptance of multiple cultures within one state into a framework for political practice. It embraces cultural pluralism and grants consent for individuals to live by their own cultural traditions provided that they live within the law. State multiculturalism in the U.K. acknowledges the need for Britain to develop, nonetheless, a sense of belonging amongst its diverse citizens through political processes. Multiculturalism has room for hyphenated and multiple identities, for multilingualism and for differences of religion and belief.

Multiculturalism is a perspective based on three main tenets: people are culturally embedded and live within a culturally structured world; different cultures represent different systems of meaning; all cultures are internally plural and represent a continuing conversation between different traditions and strands of thought (Parekh 2000: 337) Furthermore, by its own logic, one culture cannot claim superiority or monopoly within multiculturalism, even the liberal tradition that promotes multiculturalism itself. This creates a debate about state multiculturalism. How can a multicultural state engage all of its citizens and create a coherent peaceful society?

In the U.K. there are regular fierce political arguments over multiculturalism, integration and a British identity. It is a concept that has been claimed, remarked upon, demonstrated against, espoused and contested by politicians for many years. Yet it is an enduring feature of British public life and it is influential on education policies including higher education institutional policies.

Two statements by the former Prime Minister Tony Blair illustrate well the position of the Labour party which was in government from 1997-2010 (Blair resigned in 2007 and was replaced by Gordon Brown):

'...the attack on racial discrimination now commands general support, as does the value of a multicultural society'. (Tony Blair 1998, cited Tomlinson 2008: 127).

'Nations that succeed will be tolerant, respectful of diversity, multiracial, multicultural societies.'(Tony Blair 1999, cited Tomlinson 2008: 127)

In 1997 the New Labour government of the U.K. led by Prime Minister Tony Blair, had claimed to be committed to social justice and to education as a means to aid the achievement of a fairer multicultural society; however rioting in northern towns of England in April 2001 led to an appraisal of factors working against 'community cohesion'. Following these disturbances in Bradford, Burnley and Oldham, central government reports partly blamed self-segregation and urged people from ethnic minorities to develop a sense of belonging in Britain. In 1998 the Human Rights Act introduced the European Convention on Human Rights into British Law, adding support for individuals' human rights over and above pre-existing antidiscrimination laws such as the Race Relations Act. The attack on the twin towers of the World Trade Centre with its socio-political reverberations throughout the world in September 2001 led the same government into collaboration with the United States in a 'war on terror' and Britain's foreign policy was unpopular with many British citizens particularly Muslims (Tomlinson 2008: 126). Sally Tomlinson went on to add that the concerns of settled minorities about inequality of opportunities were conflated with problems associated with the arrival of more European economic migrants, refugees and asylum seekers (Tomlinson 2008: 148).

In 2011 another newly elected Prime Minister, the Conservative David Cameron (leader of the Conservative Liberal Democrat Coalition), caused considerable controversy when he launched an attack on state multiculturalism in a speech on 5 February 2011 to an international security conference in Munich. He claimed that multiculturalism encourages different cultures to live separate lives and even warned that multiculturalism could foster extremist ideology and directly contribute to home grown Islamist terrorism by creating enclaves. He warned Muslim groups that if

they fail to endorse women's rights or promote integration they will lose all government funding. David Cameron proposed 'muscular liberalism' in place of multiculturalism, but did not go into much detail about what this means. Critics were particularly angered by the timing of Cameron's speech targeting British Muslims, on a day when the far right English Defence League were holding a rally in Luton in the U.K. One reaction was from David Blunkett, former Labour Party Home Secretary who is reported to have said: 'It's time the right hand knew what the far right hand is doing' (*Independent*: 5 February 2011).

Now, phased in between 2008 and 2010, there is a points system for immigration of skilled workers, and visa options for students, spouses, dependents and visitors. There is also continued movement of European migrant workers and continued processing of applications for asylum. Britain's race relations have a longstanding tension between restrictions of immigration at point of entry and assimilation and social cohesion attempts. Students at West Midlands universities are recruited from communities including established ethnic minority communities, from more recently arrived migrants such as people granted asylum, from European Union countries and from abroad requiring student visas. Universities are amongst a wide range of public institutions tasked with managing diversity.

Despite its longstanding existence, multiculturalism has been condemned from the right of politics on the basis that it is divisive and ineffective at preventing dangerous conflicts in society, and from the left on the basis that it disguises the need to tackle racism, inequality and disadvantage. Some critics of government multiculturalism claim that it has been used as a justification for policies that contain and isolate communities (Ali 1992). Trevor Phillips, chairman of the Commission for Racial Equality and later, from 2006, chairman of Equalities and Human Rights Commission, called in April 2004 called for multiculturalism to be scrapped, on the basis that mere celebration of diversity does nothing to redress inequality (*BBC News*: Monday 5 April 2004). The pluralist approach in British politics has attempted de-contestation of race and ethnicity in Britain using the political rhetoric of

multiculturalism. It is widely accepted today that the nineteenth-century pseudoscientific racism used to justify slavery and subjugation of colonised peoples has been discredited by science itself, and it is also argued that, rather than evaporating, racism reinvented itself and gave way to a new racism based on cultural differences and ethnicity (Barker 1981; Gilroy 1987; Cohen 1988). Tariq Modood is of the view that both biological and culturalist forms of racism continue to act together (Modood 1992). More recently he has argued that the reason multiculturalism does not die despite all of the cross party opposition to it, is that there are very few tangible policies at stake (Modood 2011). Moreover there is a dearth of alternatives from the left or from the right that attract wide enough support from the electorate. Anti-racists criticize multicultural education for being patronising and superficial (Cole and Virdee 2006). West Midlands universities include people with very different views about managing diversity and how to deal with 'race' in higher education so there is a regular debate.

In 2005 the Hate Crime Reduction Officer of the Community Safety Team of Coventry City Council and the Centre for Social Justice at Coventry University collaborated on a research project on Hate crime in Coventry. Two of the six groups that this research identified as victims of Hate crime locally were, on the one hand, asylum seekers and refugees, and, on the other, minority ethnic groups (including Irish). Main issues signalled by the report included a high level of racism continuing to exist with, for example, incidences of serious physical assaults and common continuous abusive name calling. Perpetrators interviewed through the local youth offending service did not take the issue seriously at all (Allender and Quigley 2005).

This is the context in which higher education institutions in the West Midlands of England operate. They reflect the local context but at the same time have their own demographics of students and staff recruited locally, nationally and internationally. At a national level, since the recommendations of the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry (an inquiry into the murder of a teenager and the way that the police and emergency services responded) public institutions including universities are expected to

have strategies for the prevention, recording, investigation and prosecution of racist incidents; and to be able to show evidence of multi-agency cooperation and information exchange in support of the objective of reducing institutional racism and preventing racist incidents. So, given the three arenas of racism in the UK identified by Margaret Wetherell (1996): violent physical attacks; public opinion and ideological and cultural expression of hostility; and economic inequalities and access to material resources and services including education, universities face real challenges in their duty of care for their students and staff, in the training of students going into professional roles working with a multicultural public, and in promoting equal access to higher education opportunities. They also have duties to uphold the human rights of staff and students. This can be complex because one person's rights may infringe another's. Universities in the West Midlands are all proactive in trying to meet these obligations but the challenges are real.

### **Diversity in Universities in the West Midlands of England**

Diversity is a significant feature of the student population at universities in the West Midlands of England, reflecting the multiracial demographics of the region. This demographic mosaic is subject to academic, governmental and media discourses and is widely thought of by politicians, the press and in the popular imagination, as creating tensions and problems in the wider societal arena. This chapter offers an exploration of how discourses and dynamics of this wider arena are reproduced in higher education. It discusses interactions between people with different racial identities and life experiences in relation to contested issues around the theme of 'race' within social sciences classroom settings of West Midlands universities. Based on classroom observations and interviews with social sciences staff and students, a number of themes emerge: 'otherness' (or alterity), self-definition, clustering, dominant and subjugated knowledges, and 'race'. The data is, as will be seen, frank about the perpetuation of racism despite multiculturalism. Otherness is mobilized to justify courses of action linked to complex economic and political interests (Rattansi 1995).

Reflections about the nature of identities and how they are informed by complex histories, emotions, silences and relationships are often enriched ... by ways in which particular lives are narrated. (Seidler 2010: 81)

### **Research approach**

The approach of the research was to try to elicit narratives from students and staff in informal semi-structured interviews and through observations of narratives shared during social sciences lectures, seminars and group work sessions. These provided material for reflections about alterity and emotions, silences and relationships generated by differences of 'race'.

### **A seminar discussion about the politics of identity and terminology**

During a seminar about writing dissertations a discussion was taking place about phrasing research questions and defining topics of inquiry. A student asked 'can I use the term "Black" because at college we had to use like... ethnic minority...or such like'. She went on to illustrate with a possible research topic: 'seeking your identity as a homosexual adolescent in Black Britain'. The White lecturer responded by saying that it depended whether she could articulate what she meant by Black and whether she could discuss the inclusion or exclusion criteria for the term in order to have a clear enough frame of reference for the research. The student then self-defined herself as 'Mixed', on the basis that her father is Black Jamaican and her mother is White British and said that her experiences of mixed identity have given her plenty of insight into inclusion and exclusion criteria. A Zimbabwean student followed up on the theme and said 'you are asking if you can use the term 'Black' to describe others, can I use the term 'Black' to describe myself?' The 'Mixed' student replied 'Why not? Why should there be any problem with that?' The lecturer's response was to ask whether she normally self-defines herself as Black, and to discuss the political significance of the definitions we make of ourselves. She talked about insider and outsider researchers and standpoint research and then returned to the choice of identifying as 'Black'. The student then asked the White lecturer



whether she was sure about it being wise to identify herself as 'Black' in case the White markers object to the politics of using that description. The lecturer pointed out that whilst the institution may be White to people's minds, the markers are by no means all White by their own self-definitions, that the term 'Black' and the politics of its use as a positive, proud claim should be understood by White social sciences lecturers because of the use made of the term by a succession of well respected sociologists. The student appeared to remain sceptical about whether to trust markers with her self-definition. She did not articulate an explanation for this but perhaps she intuitively mistrusts the white elephant of 'White' institutional racism despite the apparent multiracial make-up of the staff team.

### **Narratives of 'race and ethnicity'**

In Britain there are recurring dominant narratives of 'race' and ethnicity (Richards 2009) despite alleged progress towards a multicultural democratic society. Dominant and popular political narrative of 'race' in Britain is a formulaic, variable narration (Hesse 1993). Narratives of 'us and them' are recounted, repeated and varied. These are formulae texts and ritualised sets of discourses (Foucault 1984: 14) with such narratives contributing to the reproduction of dominant power relations. In order to explore the ways in which these narratives are used there is a difficult choice to be made about how to contest essentialism and at the same time find language to describe a person, which makes it clear what their position may be in a categorised context. In this discussion essentialism means reducing the complexities of people's identities to labels that categorise in an artificially simplistic way. There is an uncomfortable tension in discussing inter-ethnicity, living the construct, describing people as Black, White, Asian or Mixed Race whilst rejecting the validity of such essentialist and over-simplistic terms. Situating people helps us to understand their gaze and helps us to place their narratives but there is a constant danger of falling into the very stereotypes that the narratives challenge.

Avtar Brah (1996) told of the ways in which Britain's imperial history had situated her within what she calls the colonial sandwich. By this she means the racial categorisation of Black, Asian, White that arose from indentured labour from India being shipped to other parts of the British Empire and forming a socio-economic stratification layer between African labourers and slaves and white land and business owner occupiers. The last census took place in Britain only very recently on 27 March 2011; however, the previous census of 2001 revealed that the U.K. is more culturally diverse than ever before (Office for National Statistics 2005). We use census language here to describe demography. The majority of the population in 2001 were White (92 per cent). The remaining 4.6 million (7.9 per cent) people belonged to other ethnic groups. Around half of the non-white population were Asians of Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi or other Asian origin; a further quarter was Black: that is Black Caribbean, Black African or Other Black. Higher Education Statistics Agency for the United Kingdom 'Ethnicity Groupings' are: White, Black, South Asian, Chinese/Other Asian, Mixed and Not Known. One of the faculties of a University included in this research project has an internal report of ethnic group as a percentage of total students showing 73 per cent White, 10 per cent Black, 10 per cent South Asian, 1 per cent Chinese/other, 2 per cent Mixed and 3 per cent not known. How clearly the colonialist sandwich reproduces itself. Three demographic patterns disrupt the sandwich: 'Mixed' ethnicity, age and religion.

### **Classroom patterns of sitting: reproducing the 'colonial sandwich'**

Classroom observations showed a constantly replicated pattern of students' choice of grouping in terms of where they sit in classrooms when allowed a free choice of where to sit. They sit in groups of White students, groups of Black students and groups of Asian students with very few exceptions and those on the margins between the groups are often people whose personal history explains their comfort in being with both groups, for example, Mixed Race people, parents of Mixed Race children and people who have grown up with significant contact with the groups beside whom they are sitting. The pattern may be predictable to a certain extent but the recurrence is striking and

inescapable. Spatial foundations of community construction in the patterns of local urban settlement contribute to the make-up of the student body and get reproduced in spatial distribution of seating patterns in the classroom. When asked about this clustering one of the students interviewed, said: 'I don't think it is okay but it's who you feel comfortable with. It's just in us but we need to mix; we learn more by mixing'.

Formation of clusters of immigrant settlement 'enables immigrant groups to make social adjustments to their host society and allows urban environments to accommodate difference' (Vaughan 2007: 3). Sustaining communal ties provides support, assistance, and the security of cultural and linguistic familiarity. Students in a university room cluster for similar reasons. It enables them to make social adjustments to the strangeness of university culture and processes. A British Pakistani student described this strangeness and the reassurance of having fellow British Pakistanis with whom to sit:

Starting University is hard. It is so weird I can't get used to how things go. I heard that to talk to your teacher you have to make an appointment and other things like that I am just not used to and I don't know what is expected of me. That shuts me out. The only people I can relate to are my cousin and our friend who is another Pakistani. I hang out with them and we try to work it out together; so far I don't know anyone else really to talk to.

### **Students' imagined neighbourhood communities**

Students in a taught session on approaches to Community Work were asked to analyse different approaches by applying them to a neighbourhood case study. The 'case' was a description of an inner city area of a city in the West Midlands region of England. They immediately related the imaginary neighbourhood to areas with which they were familiar and the discussions turned to patterns of settlement and 'ethnic' segregation. They started to design community initiatives to bring different groups together. They did not appear to see any irony in doing this whilst mirroring

that pattern in their choices of grouping and sitting distribution within the room. Segregation is a politically charged notion in England because it is associated with accusations against Muslim communities in official reports of self-segregation and isolation (Home Office 2001; Phillips 2005; Smith 2005). Clustering in the classroom 'reflects what happens out there' according to an Asian lecturer who says she used to think of it as an issue but now is not so bothered: she takes it as natural and to be expected since it reflects what is happening in communities in the region. When students are asked to work together in mixed groups she does not experience resistance but soon afterwards they fall back into comfort zones based on similarities between them. Clustering does not necessarily equate with segregation; it can be a protective device for oppressed minorities (Vaughan 2007).

#### **A challenge about 'Countries of Origin' and self-definition**

A Black lecturer in a taught session about international comparisons in social welfare practice wanted students to use their personal experiences to explore international comparisons between community development approaches. He described how he had asked students to form groups based on their country of origin. Before anyone moved, a Zimbabwean mature student challenged him to explain why they should group according to country of origin. She wanted to know 'what is this about?' He reports that he justified his request by explaining that it was for educational reasons so as to make international comparisons using the knowledge and expertise within the room. She and her friends looked unimpressed and did not budge; no-one moved and, according to the lecturer, 'you could hear a pin drop'. The lecturer asked some White students what their country of origin was and one replied 'England', another 'Scotland', so he invited people to form a group around England and a group around Scotland. Another group formed around France. All of these groups were multi-racial based on country of birth and early childhood; people considering by self-definition England, Scotland or France to be their country of origin and /or their home. By default the class then ended up with one 'African group' of students from multiple African countries, a

majority Zimbabwean. This African group worked together on the activity really collectively once the exercise started. The 'England' group were more fragmented and individual and did not collaborate well to achieve and maintain a focus on the task. The lecturer pointed out the contrast between collectivism and individualism as a contrast between the groups and this was met with the next stunned 'silence', this time from the 'England' group of students; this was followed by attempts by this group to deny and then attempts to justify this.

### **Feeling Second Class in a Tolerant Environment**

One of the interviewed students said that she finds it a tolerant environment with lecturers from 'mixed backgrounds' and that the level of tolerance and acceptance is 'better than outside'. However, she also said that she has noticed that the course she is on has more Black people than any other course. She was not sure whether this was due to entry criteria or because the course director is Black or because the field is attractive to certain communities; but she said that as a member of a group of Black women friends 'we've all noticed and spoken about it and no-one can answer it and for sure we have always felt second class'. It was an interesting rapid shift from talking about tolerance to talking about feeling 'second class'. This is a feature of race relations in England. Race is a power relationship with a longstanding discourse of White supremacy and Black exclusion and subjugation. Tolerance almost invariably involves power relations that keep the other in their place (Ahmed 2005). Vandebroek (2007) suggests that a multicultural approach obscures the power relationship inherent in the anti-racist approach that focuses on the Black-White opposition. Fanon famously (1967: 110) wrote 'for not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man. Some critics will take it on themselves to remind us that this proposition has a converse. I say that this is false'. He continued by describing how he felt stereotyped 'by the other, the white man, who had woven me out of a thousand details, anecdotes, stories' (Fanon: 111). Black students are trying to find ways of describing this as their experience at university more than forty years later. They can sense the white elephant in the room but it eludes their definition

and explanation. They can feel it but it is hard to prove that it is there. They can share this sense with each other but it is not easy to communicate with White students who may get personally defensive rather than seeing the bigger picture, or with the powerful White institution personified by staff. As bell hooks put it:

...black folks have, from slavery on, shared with one another in conversations 'special' knowledge of whiteness gleaned from close scrutiny of white people. Deemed special because it was not a way of knowing that has been recorded fully in written material, its purpose was to help black folks cope and survive in a white supremacist society. (hooks 1992: 338)

### **Whiteness**

Hooks' thinking about representations of whiteness in the Black imagination has been stimulated by classroom discussions. She describes how white students respond with disbelief, shock, and rage, as they listen to Black students talk about Whiteness and how White students respond with naïve amazement that Black people critically assess White people from a standpoint where 'Whiteness' is the privileged signifier. She observes that:

Often their rage erupted because they believe that all ways of looking that highlight difference subvert the liberal conviction that it is the assertion of universal subjectivity (we are all just people) that will make racism disappear. (hooks 1992: 339)

The group of Black women students feeling 'second class' together are aware of the presence of that liberal conviction and defensiveness within the culture of the university. In the universities where this research took place multiculturalism is ordinary and diversity is taken for granted as a positive feature of the institutions without room for a critique from a Black perspective.

### **Being treated as 'other' and 'less'**

Alterity is the construction of classes of people as other than us and less than us. It is a process whereby we construct a group as other and project onto them qualities we reject, fear or disown in ourselves; and we assign qualities to individuals by inclusion in this group. Everyday interactions can be a point of investigation of alterity (Treacher 2006). A Muslim student interviewed described the difference between his visibility; and the degree to which he is mistrusted and stereotyped in some contexts and locations; and in the university where his appearance is more ordinary in the environment of the region and within the institution:

...say when I went up to Aberdeen they were all looking at us strangely because of our appearance , especially because of our beards and how we dress. Even at university here; some of the ones who come here from areas like Herefordshire and mostly White places like that make weird assumptions until they get to know individuals. Otherwise, here it is normal to look like us around here and no-one bats an eyelid, the stereotypes are still here but they are more subtle. In the Islamic Society we still discuss how we are misunderstood in various situations but day to day we don't get too much fear or animosity. Multiculturalism is normal here and relationships are more complex than the obvious treatment of groups as different. Those who've grown up around here know the details.

He too acknowledges that 'multiculturalism is normal' and is relieved about that to some extent but dissatisfied that more complex forms of alterity and more subtle forms of racism are not addressed.

### **Cultural references in the curriculum**

Within a research workshop with students preparing to write an undergraduate research project students were asked to do an exercise based on a chapter entitled 'What is Methodology (Clough and Nutbrown 2002). The authors propose two tests of research questions which many students find very accessible and helpful tools for clarifying and focusing their research questions: the 'Goldilocks test' and the 'Russian Doll' test. The tutor explained the test assuming that the whole group would

have heard of the fairy tale 'goldilocks and the three bears' and would know about the wooden painted dolls with smaller and smaller dolls hidden inside the outer doll known in Britain as Russian dolls. However the blank expressions on several African students' faces alerted the lecturer to her mistake in making that assumption. She asked the class how many of them knew the popular children's fairy tale and many of students who grew up outside the UK did not so she found herself telling the story of Goldilocks, a young blonde haired girl lost in a forest and her experiences in the house of Mummy Bear, Daddy Bear and Baby Bear. The story includes chairs that are too big, too small and 'just right'; and bowls of porridge that are too hot, too cold and 'just right'. Finally the lecturer could get to the meaning of the task set in the class of testing whether research questions are too big, too small or just right; too hot, too cold or just right. She then recognised that she needed to check whether everyone knew what a Russian doll is and since not everyone did, in fact there was a chorus of 'no' s, she explained this and only then could she move on to show how this could be used as a metaphor for the multi-layered nature of research questions. This is an instance of prerequisite knowledge for working at university being assumed because of the dominant Eurocentric culture prevailing in British higher education despite the make-up of the student population. It is more disturbing if the image of Goldilocks is reflected on for a moment or two: the archetypal blonde, blue-eyed embodiment of innocence and goodness. Expressions of white supremacy can be so easily, unconsciously and regularly brushed off as innocent.

### **Hierarchy of knowledge in the classroom**

Alterity not only marks out some people as different from others it diminishes them and one of the most common ways for this to happen in a university, where the currency is knowledge, is by ranking the knowledge of some people above than the knowledge of 'others'. Foucault analysed the relationship of power and knowledge, describing the established history and hierarchy of ideas and the ways that academic institutions sanction some forms of dominant knowledge whilst diminishing other forms of knowledge. He used the term 'subjugated knowledges' for de-legitimated knowledge



of less powerful communities. Foucault contrasted these local, discontinuous, disqualified knowledges with the claims of a powerful body of theory claiming to be real science and filtering and ordering knowledge to compete for the peak of the pyramid of the hierarchy of knowledge (Foucault 1972).

### **Hiding confusion to keep up appearances**

A guest lecturer was demonstrating to students how to search for literature using databases. She had the internet up on a screen and was conducting searches whilst advising on strategies for doing an effective literature review. She repeatedly enquired whether the students followed what she was saying; she said 'okay?' often and 'is that clear?' or 'do you understand? One of the white students asked a question about referencing conventions. Everyone else kept quiet. When the lecturer had concluded her demonstration and left the room a tutor who had been present throughout asked the group if they had really understood and they admitted that they had not followed everything. Several African students revealed that they had found the presentation very fast and somewhat complex. The point of interest for this chapter is not that they did not understand, but that they did not say so until challenged by a tutor who knew them well and was watching their reactions to try to assess whether the whole group had acquired the skills they need to conduct independent research using the standards of the academy. 'Growing up in a culture of assimilation you learn to show aspects of yourself that accord with the dominant culture' and people learn to minimize the significance of differences as they learn to behave like everyone else (Seidler 2010: 131). When this extends to pretending to understand in order to appear assimilated it is obviously detrimental to learning.

### **Student led workshop enables self-naming and dialogue**

By contrast, the findings of this research are a reminder of the 'energising effects of a dialogue which enables self-naming' (Nelson et al 2000: 353) and the importance of collective recognition. Students were set a task of doing a group presentation about cross-cultural communication. The presentation started with some theory about culture and about giving and receiving messages and signals in cross-cultural situations. The audience took notes and stored away the handouts in their folders. Then a Zimbabwean student introduced his contribution to the group presentation by getting everyone to learn a song from his tradition in his mother tongue. The whole dynamic changed. Having seemed deferential and apologetic at first his confidence shone through. He became animated and his competence brought his performance to life. Other African students responded by getting excited about the familiarity of the knowledge that he had brought into the classroom, a space where it would not normally be entertained. The Asian students appeared cautious about joining in but seemed to enjoy the unexpected assertion of an otherwise 'outside' culture within the university classroom. The white students all tried to learn the song and enjoyed it; they found it non-threatening and interesting, probably because it was contained in a presentation safely called cross-cultural communication and they knew that it was temporary and would return to the periphery after a few minutes. This illustrates alterity in that language and cultural practices marked boundaries and difference between groups of people in the classroom; although a brief assertion was enjoyed, the way that this was patronised kept the dominant frames of reference in place. For a short interlude a space was given for knowledge to be shared that is normally excluded from the centre of academic attention. However, the boundaries of a special session about cross-cultural communication kept the knowledge subjugated within the hierarchical stratification of knowledge (Foucault 1972).

### **Cultural differences of ideology and priorities in a session about social care**

During an observed session within a taught module supporting student applied community placements with theory, students were in action learning sets. The topic for discussion was

'comparing welfare policies regarding adult social care of European countries' and the starting point for these discussions was the Dartington Review (Glendinning 2010) on lessons that England can learn from other countries. In one of the action learning sets a young Asian woman who is normally very reserved and quiet became very animated and pronounced loudly and clearly that she would 'drop everything to look after my mother-in-law if something happened to her, nothing else would matter I would just prioritize her. Other people in the family would expect that of me, my community would expect it and I expect it of myself'. An African woman from another Action Learning Set (and what had been a separate group discussion) replied across the room saying 'where I am coming from it would be a matter of shame to expect anyone outside the family to take care of my parents I would feel disgraced'. The discussion became a whole classroom conversation. A young white English woman asked 'why should a woman with a good job, like hopefully me in future, give up everything she has worked for to provide care when other people could be paid and employed to do that and can be trained and follow that career choice?' Then a young white English disabled student with experience of needing personal care assistance said 'my parents are my parents, I would much prefer intimate help from a paid care worker. Then my dad's still my dad.' In an interview, a Social Work lecturer reported an incident in one of her lectures. She was talking about attitudes to age within different societies and used an example of a culture in which elders are highly respected on account of the experience they had gained due to longevity. She pointed out that different cultural understandings of age could impact on social policy about Adult Social Care. She was interrupted by an African-Caribbean student who gave her a 'shock because she was quite angry with what I had said and was adamant that culture should not come into decisions about social care because too many assumptions are made and generalisations about cultural norms can lead to a misrepresentation that certain communities do not need care services because they look after their own'. The white lecturer had inadvertently hit a nerve in the politics of allocation of Adult Social Care resources and perceived disadvantage and discrimination issues. Communities seen as having a collectivist culture and extended family systems are assumed to 'look after their own' and

sometimes this means that assumptions are made and people's support needs are overlooked rather than a full needs assessment being carried out. This example points to the dangers of generalising and of basing policy and practice on perceptions rather than on empirical evidence and needs analysis. In grouping people according to assumed characteristics of difference she believed that she was respecting difference positively; but the student who interrupted her heard a danger of discrimination and disadvantage. The lecturer was challenged for grouping people together and, while she denied it, she was being accused essentially of alterity.

### **Individualism, collectivism and damaging stereotypes**

English universities reward individualism rather than collectivism. The emphasis is on individual study and attainment, rewarded with individual assessment scores and degree classifications. The traditional 'academic rigour' of formal education dominating the pedagogy of universities still puts value on objective, rational deduction, evidence and scientific methods. Oral cultures are still sidelined and discouraged because anecdotal debate and conversation are not scientific enough and students are told that they should come more logically and critically to conclusions. Talking adamantly in an animated group that is collectively exploring views is not given credence. Although the group is working towards conclusions rather than being seemingly stuck in adamant claims (as more individualist witnesses may assume), this is regarded in the culture of 'white academia' as too conversational, too loud, lacking discipline and unsophisticated. People all talking over one another is not viewed as passion for the subject but as unruly chat. Whilst this could be regarded as 'simply' cultural difference, it also exemplifies racial stereotyping, alterity and subjugation of knowledge. The way that this style of interaction is regarded is far from objective, it is charged with racial stereotypes and negative attitudes towards the 'other'. Characterization of Black people by White people as being aggressive, unruly, loud and dangerous in a crowd, is a throwback to imperialist attitudes held by rulers to justify power and control regimes. This is contrasted with equally inaccurate, overgeneralized and essentialist notions of white Europeans being rational, self-

disciplined, calm and reflective. This is an example of alterity: of identifying people as belonging to a different group, attributing characteristics to them on the basis of this grouping and discrediting them in the process. The situation is also an observation of a mechanism for the subjugation of knowledge: downgrading the value of knowledge on the basis of the style in which it is communicated. Whilst the conversation could be used to illustrate cultural difference, given the stereotyping, alterity and subjugation involved, it can be taken as an illustration of racism.

### **Avoiding painful subjects**

Various ways of avoiding painful subjects were observable and were mentioned by students interviewed. Changing the subject, moving swiftly on, lecturing rather than opening up subjects for debate, are all ways in which lecturers avoid contentious issues that are routinely in evidence despite the claims of social scientists to be open and welcoming of forthright debate. Cultural differences are visible in the reaction on the part of lecturers and other participants to adamant comments and heated communications and the extent to which these are effectively harnessed for pedagogy. During an interview, a student reported a situation he had experienced within a recent taught session on an undergraduate social sciences programme. He described a session during which a series of photographs were projected onto a screen to encourage debate. On the face of it the lecturer was open to contentious debate and was willing to take risks in provoking discussions of sensitive political issues. He gave the example of a slide being put up of the New York twin towers skyline before and after 9/11. As a Muslim he said he braced himself for a difficult but needed discussion about terrorism and the impact of acts of terror on community relations; however, the discussion was rather superficial and brief and the lecturer did not specifically invite people in to offer various points of view within the class despite the opportunity presented by the diversity of the group and the relatively safe assumption that no-one present would have been likely to try to justify 9/11. Moving the slides on swiftly seemed to him to be a mechanism to avoid contested issues and

deeper consideration of the pain involved in remembering such a divisive recent political/ historical incident.

### **Leaving the debate to two people locked in disagreement**

In a group work session there was a small group discussion about difference in groups following on from the showing of a video about managing diversity in groups. One of the black students claimed that he did not feel different on grounds of race, that it was all 'imaginary', and that it was erroneous to suggest that race has to be an issue of difference when working in and with groups of people. He said that he felt that claims of experiencing racism were an excuse by black people and that black people needed to get more focused on contributing and achieving. This drew a black woman into the discussion and the two students got locked into a heated exchange of views. The rest of the group observed and allowed the debate to be channelled through the pairing rather than making any attempt to comment. Her perspective, as a young Somalian woman, was that racism is a daily experience and she believes that it needs to be brought out into the open, accepted as peoples' lived experience and challenged. The remainder of the group were young white people and behaved as though the disagreement absolved them from thinking through the issues, their attitude being: if black people cannot even agree about racism why should we get involved? Pairing is a common way for two opposing positions in a group to be channelled through two people whilst others look on and allow the opposition to play itself out without intervening. When the pair finally started to conclude their exchange there was a silence and then the only Irish white student in the group took the discussion to cultural differences and inter-ethnicity rather than race. He could be thought of as employing the avoidance strategy identified above, of 'moving the subject along' from 'race' to culture. He was also bringing in a wider debate about race and culture which has run within social sciences for decades. Irishness has presented a challenge to political 'blackness' to mobilise solidarity between all those subjected to the racism of British colonialism. Political Blackness has also been disputed by Modood as excluding specific concerns of British Asians (Modood 1994).

## **Social construction of 'Race'**

Social Science research on ethnic minorities in England has shifted from being conceptualised in terms of a concern with 'colour' in the 1950s, to race in the 1960s, then 'race' and culture in the 1970s, ethnicity in the 1980s, multiculturalism in the 1990s (Peach 2005; Halsall 2007); segregation and preventing violent extremism in the 2000s, and individual identity and Human Rights in 2010. This chapter may seem out of sequence because it still has 'race' as its reference point. Under the critical influences of postmodernism, the social construction of 'race' has become manifest and deconstruction has provided an important reminder not to categorise people into essentialist camps as if those categories are real and immutable (Malik 1996; Ratcliffe 2004). Despite this awareness of the social and political discourses that have created and sustained 'race' and racism in English society, there is a persistent habit of grouping and allegiances based on race and ethnicity. Peter Radcliffe cites Ashley Montagu (1974) who described the notion of 'race' as 'man's most dangerous myth' (Radcliffe 2004: 15), since race 'despite being devoid of scientific validity has nevertheless retained a hegemonic position in public consciousness' (Montagu 1974: 28). Stuart Hall attempted to critique 'ethnic absolutism' and binary conceptions of race being 'black and white' by introducing theoretical contributions about new ethnicities and cultural hybridity (Hall 1992). Sivanandan (1995) accused his contemporaries such as Stuart Hall and Phil Cohen of focusing on culture and ethnicity and detracting from the material consequences of 'race' and racism. Whilst he was talking about retreat from Marxist analysis and class struggle, this chapter attempts to keep a focus on 'race' and not to retreat into cultural explanations for interactions between individuals and small groups in order to face up to the everyday impact of 'race' on inter-personal relations in education. The ordinariness of so-called everyday life is still shot through with the constant interplay and dynamics of people racializing one another. 'Race' may have been proved not to exist biologically in the form of distinct 'races' of people but such categories are alive and well psychologically in the popular imagination (Boas 1940; Frankenberg 1993). 'Race' discourse in England is the result of complex political, economic and social histories and the continuance and operation of these discourses

involve people acting individually and collectively in all kinds of interactions with each other (Wetherell 1996: 177). It is a process of representing or making sense of the 'other': a set of 'processes through which communities are constructed and various forms of us and them are created' (Miles 1989: 181). The process of dealing with difference and communicating with people as 'other' in terms of race was observed in many instances within this small scale research project in higher education social sciences taught sessions.

### **Keeping quiet**

An Asian student interviewed described how 'often people just keep quiet; they may only discuss in contexts when they are aware of people's view of them, they wait and talk it over in friendship groups'. Social theory students had a lecture about race. A student interviewed reported that she found that racism became a very sensitive topic and that white students were trying to justify unintentional racism and distance it from direct racism during a lecture by a Sikh British Asian lecturer. 'We were talking about discrimination in employment. People were cautious to say something in case they offend black people. I liked the tutor but most of the white students felt offended and waited and complained behind his back. They labelled him as racist himself because of his emphasis on the Black side'. Another interviewed student described how students avoid contributing to contentious topics about race in the classroom and just 'keep it in until they get outside and it bursts out in the break time conversations'. This is an important consideration for educationalists: how to treat the informal extension of classroom discussions so that they enhance learning and do not cause unintended confusion, misinformation, or division.

### **Institutional Racism**

According to the report of the inquiry into the death of London teenager Stephen Lawrence, institutional racism may be:



...seen or detected in processes, attitudes and behaviour which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping which disadvantage minority ethnic people. (Macpherson 1999)

The aim of this research was to explore the processes, attitudes and behaviour within higher education classroom communication between people because of their differences of colour, culture or ethnic origin and examine racist stereotyping at work; particularly unwitting prejudice, ignorance and thoughtlessness. This is not to suggest that universities are any more or less institutionally racist than other organisations but rather to show how common and persistent racism is, despite good intentions and despite committed attempts to tackle it by institutions and by anti-racist individuals. This small scale research project involved observation of interactions in taught sessions and semi-structured interviews with students and academic staff of three different universities each of them enjoying very diverse student and staff populations. All of those interviewed were avowedly against racism and were well educated in debates around race and racism because they are all social scientists and have at least been introduced to the topic of 'race' and ethnicity within sociology and psychology undergraduate courses. They all live at the heart of Britain's multiculturalism in what Appadurai has called a global ethnoscape (Appadurai 1991), a term which he introduced to describe a shifting world: a moving world of tourists, immigrants, refugees, guest-workers and of exiles. Universities in the West Midlands operate in this environment and add thousands of students into the mix of the global ethnoscape, some of whom are immigrants, some British born descendants of former immigrants and some international students entering the United Kingdom specifically to study at university.

### **Talking across boundaries of difference**

The research itself involved talking across borders of 'race', of statuses such as lecturer and student, across competing higher education institutions in different parts of a region full of territorialities, and across age, class, gender and religion. Its findings suggest that alterity is prevalent in interactions

in social science classrooms in the universities concerned, all of which are multiracial urban universities in the West Midlands of England. Alterity has been seen to involve grouping people in categories including racial categories and othering them as different and lesser and this is a classification which still depends on the old discourses of the 'colonial sandwich'. Social construction of 'race' creates and sustains imaginary sameness between people based on historically and socially created group categories with generalised stereotypes attributed to them. The operation of racialized boundaries persists in day to day interactions between staff and students despite their espoused efforts to be anti-racist. Roles in mediating these include teaching directly about race and ethnicity but also handling conversations when they arise in less expected contexts in debates and exchanges. This chapter has explored how 'race' group categories are used in practice within educational communications. The importance of self-naming and self-definition has been highlighted. Clustering in the classroom, and the way that this mirrors society in the region, has been discussed. Tolerance has been critiqued as an inadequate response to the challenges of working with multi-racial groups of people in higher education as it tends to maintain existing power relations. Dominant and subjugated knowledges have been illustrated through classroom observations and commented on by staff and students interviewed. The perpetuation of racializing has been evidenced and this despite the equalities measures invested in by well intentioned institutions: unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping prove very difficult to eradicate. To overcome this everyone involved needs continued and better opportunities to express truthfully their views and feelings about 'race' and higher education; people need to get past awkward silences, avoidance, defensiveness, aggression and stereotyping. The White Elephant of 'Race' in the classrooms of social sciences in West Midlands Universities will only leave if it is talked about, made visible, faced up to and openly debated in a well informed and candid way amongst staff and students. Since, as argued above with reference to Montagu and Radcliffe, despite being discredited by academics and anti-racists, race has persisted in framing public thinking, this is self-evidently wishful thinking. The elephant is likely to be staying around, with some people in

the room more aware of its presence than others. There have been constant brave attempts to bring down the centuries old paradigm of 'race' and it has lived on. Nonetheless in a context where 'race' is such an everyday life experience and where academic disciplines have such a clear mandate to raise issues and discuss them within the classroom there is hope that, with skilled facilitators, educational value can be derived from bringing the elephant into focus.

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