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Qualitative Psychology: A weapon in the battle against scientific racism

Abstract

In this paper I argue that qualitative psychology can be seen as an effective tool in challenging scientific racism. Scientific racism can be understood as the pervasive idea that 'race' is a 'natural' and 'real' category which can be measured to show racial differences in various qualities (such as IQ). Qualitative psychologists have been prominent in challenging the use of race as a category in psychological research, and in doing so have highlighted the damage that this category use can do. Qualitative psychologists have offered a far better alternative, which is to address the ways that race is talked about, used and understood by speakers, which not only challenges scientific racism, but can help to challenge racism more widely.

Scientific racism

Scientific racism is the term given to scientific practices that can be viewed as racist. The very worst of scientific racism can be seen in eugenics – the process of enforced 'selective breeding', usually by sterilizing or internment of people with so called undesirable qualities such as 'feeble-mindedness' (e.g. Farreras, 2014) and the Nazi's Holocaust. However, psychologists have also been guilty of scientific racism (Newby & Newby, 1995), arguably most prominently in the linking of race and intelligence in prominent and controversial research such as Herrnstein and Murray's (1994) *The Bell Curve*, which claimed to show that on average White Americans were one standard deviation more intelligent than Black Americans on IQ tests. While the linking of race and IQ is controversial (e.g. Newby & Newby, 1995), what appears less controversial is the use of race as a category in mainstream psychology. However, it will be shown that the uncritical use of race as a category can be extremely damaging, and that qualitative psychology has challenged this.

Challenging race with Qualitative Psychology

Condor (1988) challenged scientific racism in her critique of the use of racial categories and the concept of 'racial stereotypes,' arguing that both of these are social constructs that are constructed through talk. She claimed that using existing racial categories without attempting to understand how they are constructed and used means that psychologists can 'take the existence and significance of 'race' categories for granted' (1988, pp.72). Instead Condor sought to identify exactly how 'racism' is understood by lay people (rather than psychologists), showing that it is understood as one of four things: '(i) ungrounded belief in category differences between people; (ii) intolerance of group differences; (iii) attributing differences to nature rather than social causes; and (iv) ill feeling to low status groups from high status group members' (Figgou & Condor, 2006, pp.225).

Hopkins et al. (1997) developed Condor's criticisms and warned that social psychologists addressing race could actually be *contributing* to racism by uncritically accepting racial categories:

it could be argued that psychology has not become less racist, but that, for 'race' as for so many other things, the discipline reflects the dominant ideological assumptions and 'common sense' of its age and that as these have changed so psychology has incorporated elements of the 'new racism' into itself (Hopkins et al, 1997, pp.308)

'New racism' (e.g. McConahay, 1986) refers to the reduction in overt racism, but where racism is still deemed to exist in more hidden ways. Hopkins and colleagues therefore claim that by uncritically treating race as a 'real' category, psychologists can hide the socially constructed nature of race as a concept, which means that it can be viewed as a natural biological category, which even biologists do not consider to be the case (see Tate & Audette, 2001), thus reproducing 'new racism'. Indeed, Gillespie, Howarth and Cornish argue that

‘social categories are historical’ (2012, pp.393) because social categories and human groups are always changing. Race is perhaps the perfect example of this, with the notion of a hierarchy of ‘races’ historically used to justify the treatment of inhabitants of colonised countries and slaves (Newby & Newby, 1995).

Qualitative Psychological studies of race

To illustrate their argument about social psychology’s uncritical use of racial categories and to show instead how talk about race is used flexibly to achieve specific ends, Hopkins, Reicher and Levine performed a qualitative analysis of an interview with a Police-Schools Liaison officer (PSLO), whose job it was to speak to schoolchildren about police related activities. This interview took place during a time of controversies for PSLOs due to recent claims of racism levelled at a different PSLO. In addition to this, ‘stop and search’ police tactics had been seen to be disproportionately aimed at black people, which had led to some collective action, in the form of public protests by black people living near to the school where the PSLO worked. Their analysis demonstrated that racial categories were not often used, but that when they were used by the PSLO, it was to challenge the legitimacy of anti-‘stop and search’ demonstrations and to defend PSLO practice against potential accusations of racism. The following (shortened) extract from their analysis of the PSLO’s talk illustrates how this ‘category construction means that the charge of police racism is construed as saying nothing about police racism and everything about the problematic nature of their presence.’ (Hopkins et al., 1997, pp.320):

And there is a small minority who have no intention of sort of conforming to the standards that we have in our society, who are very, very anti-police. And who, in their, who, I think are totally racist in their attitudes. They’re totally sort of anti-white as well. They take their resentment out on whatever form of authority they can see, which in the case of the police is the natural outlet for their anger really. (Hopkins et al., 1997, pp.320)

From this Hopkins and colleagues concluded that, ‘we must have a social psychology which pays due attention to the subtle and complex ways in which difference is created, racialized and presented as problematic, and how this is achieved in relation to potentially available alternative category constructions’ (Hopkins et al., 1997, pp.324). Such an endeavour requires qualitative analysis of how these categories are constructed.

My own research into representations of asylum seekers led me towards further investigating how race is used in talk and in particular what counts as racism, since so much talk about asylum seeking is bound up with claims that opposition to asylum seeking is not racist. This has led me to focus on the ways that race can be removed from talk about asylum seeking (Goodman & Burke, 2011) in a process that Augoustinos and Every describe as ‘discursive deracialization’, ‘in which racial categories are attenuated, eliminated, or substituted and racial explanations are omitted or de-emphasised’ (2007, pp.133) so supposedly non-racial explanations are given for claims that could arguably contain a racial element. Elsewhere (e.g. Johnson & Goodman, 2013), I have seen how the concept of race was used by the (then) leader of the British National Party in rather unsuccessful attempts to present white British people as the real victims of racism, which had they been successful would have worked to protect him and his party from accusations of racism (rather like in Hopkins et al.’s (1997) analysis) and would have provided justification for the party’s tough stance against immigration. More recently I’ve noticed that for some people involved in internet discussions, what counts as a race - and therefore what counts as racist - can be separated from what counts as prejudiced, all in the service of bolstering opposition to a minority group (in this particular case, it was to oppose Romani Gypsies; see Goodman & Rowe, 2014).

That race is a social construct, rather than a biological one, is a view put forward by not only qualitative psychologists. In June 2000, the head of the human genome project declared that genetically there is no such thing as race (see McCann-Mortimer et al., 2004). However,

rather than this claim ending the use of race as a valid concept, McCann-Mortimer et al. (2004)'s qualitative work has demonstrated how a range of media sources have responded to this claim in varying ways, with some sources supporting the idea that race as a biological variable should be abandoned, and others calling for its continued use, claiming that the human genome project announcement was politically, rather than scientifically, motivated. This led McCann-Mortimer et al. to the rather bleak conclusion that, 'It will take much more than the rhetorical power of scientific 'truth' to eradicate racism' (2004, pp.429).

Conclusion: Qualitative Research as a Weapon

My argument is not that only qualitative researchers challenge the use of the concept of race, with geneticists challenging this idea as early as the 1930s (see Richards, 1997), The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization publically declaring race a social construct in 1950 (UNESCO, 1950) and more recently the human genome project show us this is not the case. However, what is being argued is that qualitative psychology provides us with tools to challenge the use of race as a 'real' category by addressing the ways that race is constructed and how racial categories are used. As the examples presented here demonstrate, talk about race is never straightforward; rather than simply describing a real, biological variable, talk about race is used flexibly to achieve specific ends. It seems from these examples that talk about race is often used to achieve the *denial* of racism. By focussing on the ways in which talk about race can be used, qualitative psychologists are able to continue to challenge the idea that race is 'real' while also better understanding arguments that are used to support racism. For these reasons qualitative psychology should be viewed as a potent weapon in the battle against scientific racism.

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