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# 'I hope we won't have to understand racism one day': Researching or reproducing 'race' in social psychological research?

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“I hope we won’t have to understand racism one day”:

Researching or reproducing 'race' in Social Psychological research?

**Abstract**

This paper examines the reification *and* problemisation of ‘race’ in Psychological research in both influential studies in the field and in my empirical work. The main argument is that we need to examine how representations of ‘race’ are assumed, produced and contested in research practice. This argument is made by a) showing how research in the area adopts everyday representations of ‘race’ as essentialised and b) with an illustration of the construction of ‘race’ within my study. This study explores how children in a predominantly white setting accept and contest representations that *race*. 22 children from a range of cultural backgrounds volunteered to discuss their views and experiences of ‘race’ and racism in a naturalistic research activity. The analysis reveals that racialised difference is something that is constructed as both ‘real’ – in that it can be seen, touched and even caught from ‘the other’ *and* simultaneously something that is constructed, imposed and damaging. This highlights the possibilities for racialised others to take up positions as agents and not (only) as objects of the racialising and racist gaze, and so presents the case for thinking, debating and researching beyond reifying representations of ‘race’. This has important lessons for Social Psychology: namely, we cannot continue to take racial categorisation as a naturalistic or self-evident aspect of the social worlds that our discipline plays an important role in constructing and defending.

“Psychological theory is not only a commentary on the world and how we behave within it: it is also a part of our world and serves to shape our own self-understandings. Those models that serve to reify social categories in theory may also help to reify categories in practice. They tell us that there is only one basis of defining ourselves, only one way of perceiving others, and only one form of intergroup relations. The consequence of telling us that particular forms of domination are inevitable could be to render such domination all the more likely and to make counterdomination strategies all the more futile.”

Reicher, 2004, p. 942

Reicher makes an important point here: it is all too easy to take reified social categories *as if* they are the only ways of seeing, constructing and experiencing social relations. In this paper I explore this issue through an empirical study of racial categorisation. The focus is how people find ways of disrupting, contesting and possibly transforming ways of being *raced*<sup>1</sup> in one particular research context. In order to highlight the original contribution of this study at the level of both theory and method, I first consider the ways in which psychologists may inadvertently adopt racial categories rather unproblematically, despite the extensive critique of so-called ‘Race Psychology’ (e.g. Mama, 1995; Richards, 1997; Howitt and Owusu-Bempah, 1994) and debate over the role of essentialism in the discipline (e.g. Haslam, Rothschild and Ernst, 2000; Medin and Ortony, 1989; Verkuyten, 2003a). For example, some research in this area has operationalised ‘race’ in very straight-forward manner - often splitting participants into groups of ‘blacks’ and ‘whites’, ‘majority’ and ‘minority’ group members, ‘native’ versus ‘immigrant’ samples. This may obscure the contextual and relational aspects of identity (Tajfel, 1978; Condor, 2006), the fluidity and hybridity of racial identities (Cieslik and Verkuyten, 2006; Brah, 2007) and the dialogicality and argumentation at the heart of representations that *race* (Condor, Figgou, Abell, Gibson, and Stevenson, 2006).

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<sup>1</sup> ‘Race’ is used both as a noun and a verb in this paper. As a noun ‘race’ is problematised with speech marks in order to disrupt its taken-for-grantedness and often naturalised status in both everyday and academic discourses. This emphasises the socially constructed nature of ‘race’. When using *race* as a verb, to highlight the ways in which we *produce* ‘race’ as a seemingly meaningful system of human classification, I have used italics without speech marks.

What this paper offers is a more nuanced examination of the construction of 'race' in research practice: rather than imposing a straightforward system of racial classification onto the design of the study, in the sampling strategy or questions asked, and therefore treating 'race' as an *a priori* object of study, I explore how 'race' is constructed and resisted in this particular research context. My main argument is that we need to examine how representations of 'race' are assumed, produced and contested in research practice. This argument is made by firstly showing how much research in the area adopts everyday representations of 'race' as essentialised and then moving on to examine the construction of 'race' within my own study with children.

#### Understanding 'race' or producing 'race'?

This study is not the first to point out that racialising representations are resisted and problematised in talk and text: there has been a rich tradition of work in this vein (Billig, 1995; Condor *et al*, 2006; LeCouteur, Rapley and Augoustinos, 2001, van Dyjk, 1997; Wetherell and Potter, 1992). Nor is the discussion of the role of essentialism in academic studies of social categories by any means original (e.g. Fuss, 1989; Haslam *et al*, 2000; Verkuyten, 2003a). However, there is little empirical work that attempts to look at resistance to the ideology of 'race' in the actual process of doing research, as we see here. What is striking about some Psychological studies is the way that 'race' is generally constructed. Following the classic work by Clark (1963), researchers continue to use black, brown and white dolls, photos and drawings to elicit preferences (or otherwise) for people with corresponding skin-tones (e.g., Hirschfeld, 1995; McGlothlin and Killen, 2005)<sup>2</sup>. For example, in his 1995 paper Hirschfeld has examples of black, grey and white drawings of people representing differences in 'race', occupation and body-build. 'Race', he explains, is depicted "through variations in skin colour, facial features (lips, nose, overall shape) and hair

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<sup>2</sup> As racial categories appear distinct and separate in segregated 1930's USA, this methodology seems sensible for the contexts the Clarks worked in. Perhaps the same is true of current-day South Africa, reflected in Durrheim and Dixon's 2005 study with their straightforward classification of participants as 'black' or 'white'. However, the social structures of 'race' have changed to some degree in the US context and quite dramatically in the British context, though there are areas where children may lead 'parallel lives' and have little experience of cosmopolitanism (Rutland *et al*, 2005). My point here is that our methods need to be both historically and contextually sensitive to the changing politics of 'race'. Moreover, we need to limit the extent to which reifying representations of 'race' from the everyday come to structure and so limit the operationalisation of 'race' in research contexts.

colour and texture” (p. 222). Racial categories, then, are presented as “constant” or discrete – as we can clearly distinguish an apple tree from pine tree, children’s perception of ‘white’, ‘black’ and ‘Asian’ categories is treated similarly as a reflection of nature. This carries the potential danger of reifying and biologising ‘race’, making it a real and irrefutable fact (Gunaratnam, 2003).

Clearly such simplistic racial classifications do not map onto all contemporary experiences of racialised difference and racialised identity – where children, such as those who participated in this study, may ‘look white’ but have Indian heritage, develop a Muslim identity at home and a Liverpoolian identity at school, feel racialised by their white Irish heritage and accent, and so forth. Asking children ‘what colour their uncle should be’ (Aboud, 1988) and constructing racial difference as “relatively homogeneous” (Verkuyten and Steenhuis, 2005, p. 661), as “permanent and objective” (Aboud, 1988, p. 24), and as “stable over time” and context (Rutland, Cameron, Bennett and Ferrell, 2005, p. 701) does not make sense in many of today’s multicultural relationships. Such complex, fluid, often contradictory relationships are difficult to assess in research and they provoke challenging questions about *academic* constructions of ‘race’.

We can see traces of an ideology of ‘race’ across Psychological research (Richards, 1997) and it may seem unhelpful to pick up examples of this from some of the most insightful and influential studies on racial categorisation amongst adults and children. However, to do otherwise would undermine my central argument that all researchers need to interrogate the construction of ‘race’ in their investigative practice. Hence I shall give further two examples: Durrheim and Dixon (2005) and Verkuyten and Thijs (2002). In their otherwise deeply penetrating and innovative study of (de)segregation in South Africa Durrheim and Dixon (2005) use the concept of ‘contact partners’ which could be said to echo a somewhat essentialised and biologised account of racial ‘others’ – who *are* and therefore always will be naturally different, as distinct ‘*races*’ - plural. ‘Contact’ only makes sense on the basis that there *are* “people of different groups” (p. 160); ‘difference’ being taken for granted, for example, when “members of a different race sit next to you on the beach” (p. 171). In the heavily racialised context of (post)apartheid South Africa, it is

hard to read the beach scenes described by Durrheim and Dixon in any other way than through the lens of distinct racial groups and racial difference. As Skeggs' work (1997) highlights so vividly: "the experiences of the knowledge producers inform the knowledge productions" (p. 167). However, if we take a broader view, situate our reading within discussions of hybridity and the continuing fiction of racialised difference and so examine the construction of 'race' with research practice – the representation of "people of different races" appears problematic.

Another general criticism made of Psychological research on 'race' has been clearly expressed by Verkuyten and Thijs (2002, p. 313):

there is a tendency to treat ethnic minorities as a homogeneous group which contrasts with the majority group... That is, a distinction between white and non-white or between majority and minority group predominates. This approach ignores the many visible and cultural differences between ethnic groups that may affect the experiences of ethnic minority children.

What is valuable about Verkuyten's work is the very exact and sensitive analysis of these differences, as we see in this study of racist victimisation. However, this can also be seen to shape difference in a very particular way and exclude experiences of hybridity and multicultural identities (for an exception see Cieslik and Verkuyten, 2006). For example, in Verkuyten and Thijs' study (2002) nearly 4,000 children in the Netherlands were asked about their ethnic background and only "those children who used the same label to define themselves as well as their father and mother" (p. 316) included. Children with hyphenated ethnic-definitions were excluded from the study, and the remaining others were divided into distinct groups (Dutch, Turkish, Moroccan and Surinamese). Hence ethnicity is constructed as discrete in two main ways: a) one necessarily belonging to a singular ethnic category and b) the relationship between ethnicity and other intersectional aspects of identity (such as class, gender, sexuality, religion, lifestyle and so forth) is obscured. The focus is very much on the different experiences of distinct groups, or groups *made to appear* as distinct with their "own cultures" (p. 385). For example, they explain that "The Surinamese are from the former Dutch colony Surinam. The vast majority are Dutch nationals but their

skin colour makes them ‘visible’.” (p. 313). The significance of this racialised difference is worked into the research design as they are defined as Surinamese *not* as Dutch and their investment in ‘Dutch’ culture, their accents, their lifestyle choices, their national affiliations, which all may challenge this limiting categorisation, are left without discussion<sup>3</sup>. Thus ethnic difference is reified and elevated over the intersectional aspects of identity, cultural connections, mixed-heritage and human commonalities (Crisp and Hewstone, 2007; Brah, 2007), all of which could be just as important to the participants as their “ethnic minority” identity<sup>4</sup>. One could consider how far such difference is produced at least in part through the research design. Without this analysis the *constructed* research categories appear naturalised – and ethnicity (and less explicitly ‘race’) presented as unproblematic, essential and natural. The excluded cases of mixed-heritage children could have presented a challenge to the arbitrary logic of racialised difference and essentialism that permeates much Social Psychology.

In a more recent paper, Verkuyten has recognised that “Questions of hybridity and multiple identities are over-theorised but the number of empirical studies is limited” (Cieslik and Verkuyten, 2006, p. 77). Similarly Gunaratnam (2003) points out that “despite theoretical understandings of ‘race’ and ethnicity as relational and socially constructed, there is still a voracious appetite for approaches that freeze, objectify and tame ‘race’/ethnicity into unitary categories that can be easily understood and managed” (p. 33). One reason for this may be the difficulty in developing methods that capture the production of ‘race’ rather than invite the reification of ‘race’ as described above. What is particularly challenging is that such a study of ‘race’ (as constructed, hybrid and contested) would simultaneously need to reveal the constructed

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<sup>3</sup> Another example of this from Verkuyten is his 2003b paper on ‘*Positive and negative self-esteem among ethnic minority early adolescents*’ in the Netherlands. He describes these adolescents as ‘Turks’ and ‘Moroccans’ and they are asked questions such as “Is being Turkish (Moroccan) important to you?”, “Do you sometimes regret being Turkish (Moroccan)?” (p. 271). As far as we know, they are *not* also asked if being Dutch is important to them, despite the fact they are second generation and so may (also) identify as Dutch.

<sup>4</sup> For example, in this study the focus group moderator used various statements to elicit discussion. One of these was “To be able to get ahead in Dutch society, you have to adapt as much as possible and forget your own culture as much as possible” (Verkuyten, 2003b, p. 379). This produces a binary representation of being Dutch or other. What is revealing is the implication that one could not be both.

nature of 'race', examine the social and psychological consequences of racialised categories and expose the role of the researcher in directing and displacing representations of 'race'. This is enormously complex.

One theory that I have found to be useful in this challenge is Social Representations (Moscovici, 1984), particularly when used to explore the interconnections between representation and identity (see author, 2002, 2007; Moloney and Walker, 2007). This allows us to examine both the individual or psychological processes involved in racialisation *and* what Rosenberg (2003) calls “the collective structuring of meaning” (p. 434), here the social practices and cultural traditions that produce 'race' as a meaningful and consequential concept. As Condor *et al* (2006) have detailed, the majority of psychological accounts of prejudice are individualistic in focus – this includes attitude studies, social cognition and discursive analyses. Because of this individualism, Durrheim and Dixon (2005) advocate that “researchers must examine changes in the very nature of our shared frameworks for constructing the meaning of our relationships. As important, they must interrogate the collective practices through which such frameworks themselves become (re)produced and institutionalised” (p. 82). Social Representations Theory (SRT) is well equipped to examine such collective practices, their (re)production and institutionalisation (as Verkuyten and Steenhuis, 2005, point out) as well as highlighting psychological processes such as anchoring, objectification, identification and othering (Howarth, 2006). This has important implications for the methodological design of SRT studies, as we now turn to.

#### Experiences of 'race', racism and anti-racism at school: Methods and analysis

Early prejudice research demonstrates that children “learn social, racial and religious prejudices in the course of observing, and being influenced by, the existence of the patterns in the culture in which they live” (Clark, 1963, p. 17). Research with children using SRT shows that they take on and negotiate the cultural patterns or social representations salient in their primary relationships at home and school (Lloyd and Duveen, 1992). Children are presented with discourses of racial categorisation in geography, history and religious studies, for example, where they learn about 'whites and blacks', experience 'Black history



month' and participate in 'cultural diversity' and anti-racist activities. Hence, schools are an ideal place to examine the collaborative construction of representations that *race*.

As it is from the age of 8 that children are "most responsive to information and interventions" that target racist thinking (Aboud, 1988, p. 24), pupils aged 8 to 12 were invited to participate in this study, based in a primary school in the South East of England. Following discussions with Potter and his paper with Hepburn on the limitations of interviews (2005), I designed a research activity emulating small-group work that pupils normally did with adults at school. This involved reading them a short story (a vignette constructed from my pilot research observations<sup>5</sup>), and inviting discussion around this while they drew pictures (a naturalistic form of interviewing). My research focus was on the co-production of representations of 'race' in the dialogue generated between myself and the children.<sup>6</sup>

Two or three friendship pairs were selected from volunteers from each year group, with approximately equal numbers of girls and boys. While white British children<sup>7</sup> make up 97% of the school, I over-selected children with other heritage in order to make up half of the sample. The selected sample consisted of 11 children describing themselves as white British, English, or mixed categories such as 'Irish and Scottish', 6 describing themselves as Bangladeshi, British Pakistani, Pakistani, Indian, British Muslim and Muslim and 5 with mixed heritage from a range of other countries such as Colombia, Italy, Lebanon, Portugal, Spain and Trinidad, as well as the Roma community.

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<sup>5</sup> The pilot research consisted of a series of observations in all year groups, break-times and playground activities and informal discussions with staff and pupils over a period of 3 months. The purpose of this was to familiarise myself with the school, its ethos and the pupils. Primarily I wanted to work out a naturalistic method of research that would fit into common practices at school and the children's experiences.

<sup>6</sup> Being white, female, mid-thirties with Antipodean accent and living in the local area no doubt informed the ways in which research participants saw and positioned me and so had an impact on how they spoke about 'race' in the study. For a longer discussion on the impact of researcher identity in research into racialising representations see Howarth (2002).

<sup>7</sup> After my critique of the reification of ethnic and racialised categories above, my characterisation of children as 'white British', 'British Pakistani', 'Portuguese-Lebanese English' and so forth may seem problematic. However, these are self-descriptions and not meant to homogenise identity in a singular or essentialised manner. As Gunaratnam (2003) has said, we need "to work both *with* and against racial and ethnic categories" (p. 29).

As Dixon, Durrheim and Tredoux (2005) recommend, I sought to develop a methodology that “proceeds not from a top-down imposition of pre-given categories but from a detailed, bottom-up analysis of participants’ own frameworks of meaning as they are applied within particular social contexts” (p. 704). Using story-telling and drawing worked well in this regard – as this positioned the participants as “knowers and actors, not objects of the research” (Pole, Mizen, and Bolton, 1999, p. 46) nor as “objects of discrimination” (Hopkins and Kahani-Hopkins, 2006, p. 246). As the social construction of ‘race’ is rarely explicit in everyday discourse (Billig, 1995), it was important to present the possible significance of ‘race’ in the vignette in quite subtle ways:

*Faranaz was not very happy at school. There were some others in her class who were always picking on her. They made fun of her name and her accent. One lunchtime they started calling her nasty names. Sarah, who was her best friend, stood up for her and told the other girls to go away. This made Faranaz like Sarah even more as she thought this was very brave.*

Following Barter and Renold’s (2000) recommendations on the use of vignettes, I asked the children how they would feel as the different characters in the story and invited them to tell their own stories and find connections with their own experiences and representations of racism. The process aimed to promote critical reflection and cognitive polyphasia (Jovchelovitch, 2006) and the taking up of multiple positions and exploring contradictions – as I encouraged the children to think about alternative possibilities and to debate with each other and myself, copying teachers’ elicitation techniques. In the analysis I examined the different positions we each took up in the course of the research activity (as Hopkins *et al*, 2006, advise) and assessed the relationship between the general ethos at the school, the research context, what I asked and what they said (again following Potter and Hepburn, 2005), playing close attention to the contradictions of ‘race’ and the dialogic production of racism (Figgou and Condor, 2006)<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> There can be little doubt that social desirability and expectations of positive self-presentational behaviour had an effect what was said (Nesdale, Griffith, Durkin and Maass, 2005). The dynamics of most research encounters would encourage participants to take a more critical stance on ‘race’ than in less formalised contexts, such as an unrecorded playground conversation certainly where pupils’ behaviour and talk is less censured, as I found. However, it is important to stress that I was not exploring what children ‘really felt’ or trying to encourage the expression of racist views for the dubious sake of documentation; instead I explored the collaborative production of representations of ‘race’ in this very particular context and questioned how these may maintain and/or challenge essentialising ideologies of ‘race’.

All the textual material was analysed thematically using the procedure outlined by Attride-Sterling (2001) which “provides a technique for breaking up text, and finding within it explicit rationalizations and their implicit signification” (p. 388). This enabled me to identify and examine key themes in order to establish representations of ‘race’ and how these are contested<sup>9</sup>. Verbatim selections of text were chosen that reflect the co-construction of representations of ‘race’ and racism in the dialogue between myself and the children. Hence the quotes below represent the different themes produced and so they stand for a much wider body of material.

As developmental research would predict there were some age and gender differences in children’s use of racial categories (Aboud, 1988; Hirschfeld, 1995; McGlothlin and Killen, 2005): older children, and particularly girls, are often found to be more reflective and critical of racism. However my sample of 22 is too small to say anything meaningful about these differences. What is evident, however, is that all children used categories in ways that *both* supported and contested a simplistic or naturalising use of ‘race’. Even the youngest boys in the study used anti-racist discourses and showed that they were able to critically reflect on the construction of ‘race’. As others have found (Nesdale *et al*, 2005), developmental and gender differences are not consistent, and individuals’ use of racial categories is often contradictory (Condor, 2006). Hence my analysis does not attempt to place individuals in particular positions - as supporting or contesting racialising discourses; rather, the analysis reveals the multiple and simultaneous ways in which racial categories are maintained, developed and contested.

The focus of the analysis is this: the construction of ‘race’ in the accounts given by the children (and so their experience of ‘race’ in the everyday as they describe it) and the ways in which the research encounter invites and inhibits these constructions (e.g., what representations of ‘race’ I invite). For the sake of clarity, it is necessary to over-generalise somewhat and depict a continuum where racialised difference is *either*

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<sup>9</sup> For a detailed discussion of the analysis of narratives and drawings see author, 2007.

understood as real – in that it can be seen, touched, and even caught from ‘the other’ *or* understood something that is constructed, imposed and damaging. All participants in the study, albeit to different degrees, constructed ‘race’ as natural *and* as problematic, as we see in the next two sections.

### Reifying ‘race’: “they are not the same as us”

The most common theme in the data was that ‘race’ equates to an obvious, pre-defined and natural difference. What was striking about this construction of difference was how it was presented as both completely self-evident *and* as problematic: ‘other’ children are simply different, marked as different by their skin-colour, accent, name or clothes - and yet this difference ‘should not matter’. We can see difference as self-evident in my discussion with Richard below. In the second dialogue with Laura and Catherine, the construction of ‘race’ is more complex. (Catherine, Laura and Richard are all both white British, all 8 yrs<sup>10</sup>).

Author name: Okay, Richard, why do you think that the other children (*in the story*) picked on Faranaz?

Richard: Cos she is a different colour, because that sounded like an Indian name and her accent – and being different really.

Author name: So why do children pick on someone who is a different colour?

Richard: Because they are not the same as us.

Author name: And have you ever seen anything like this?

Laura: There was a girl in my old school called Shazia and she was from Pakistan and there was these people that were bullying her and picking on her because she had a little bit of an accent and darker skin and came from a different country. They were saying really nasty words to her – and saying ‘errrr I won’t want to be one of your friends – you’re from a different country – we are from the same country! We can do whatever we want, and we can go wherever we want – and people from other countries are really stupid’ and stuff like that.

Author name: And so how did Shiraz feel?

Laura: She felt very upset – she tried to stick up for herself, but it was continuing and continuing and so she couldn’t hold it in anymore and -

Catherine: And she probably didn’t want to go to school and she probably said to her mum that she didn’t feel very well – and that she is scared of going to school.

Laura: Yeah – she did not want to go to school cos she was scared of the people hurting her – and so the people see that and they were continuing.

Author name: And has anyone been horrible to you in this way?

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<sup>10</sup> At the very start of the research activity, before they were read the story, all the children choose the pseudonyms that used here. This is discussed in below.

Catherine: Yeah – a couple of days ago – sometimes some of the others fell out with me – for the stupidest of reasons. Then they all follow with that and follow them.

Author name: Laura?

Laura: No – not really cos I am English. No one can be horrible to me because I am English – and English people are stronger than other people. We can stick up for ourselves.

Author name: So – the story that you told me about the girl from Pakistan – do you think that was racist?

Laura: I don't really know what racism is – if someone is different it is not horrible to SAY that they are different. If someone has a funny accent or wears funny clothes it is not horrible to say that – but you should not say too much! (*laughs*)

In the first dialogue – ‘race’ is co-constructed as quite straightforward by both Richard and myself: people look different, have a different colour, have a different accent and so are not “the same as us”. In the second dialogue the contradictions of racism are more apparent. Simultaneous, potentially contradictory claims are brought out as we collectively a) construct racism is “nasty” and “horrible”, resulting in people feeling “upset” and “scared” and b) maintain a (racialised) distinction between the English and others, asking about “the girl from Pakistan”, asserting protection from racism as English and depicting the English as “stronger”. Hence racism is simultaneously rejected as “horrible” *and* upheld in claims about the significance of difference. The final sentence conveys this ambivalence: ‘race’ is real as people ‘are different’, but you need to be careful about how far you claim or defend this difference.

As Verkuyten and Thijs (2002) have discussed, ethnic minority groups are often constructed as a homogenous category. Here, children with heritage from outside England – including Colombia, Italy, Lebanon, Pakistan, Trinidad even Ireland - were generally put into the singular category of different: “not like us” and “not belonging here”. This uniform category, applied to all children seen as different, was anchored in two key images: ‘the Indian’, as we saw above, and, predictably, black skin. Hence the racial other is ‘found out’ and fixed by the colour of his or her skin (Fanon, 1952)<sup>11</sup>. As Jessica (British Pakistani, aged 10) describes:

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<sup>11</sup> This relates to Fanon’s concept of epidermalisation which “refers to a historically specific system for making bodies meaningful by endowing them qualities of ‘colour’. It suggests a perceptual regime in which the racialized body is bounded and protected by enclosing skin. The observer’s gaze does not penetrate that membrane but rests upon it and, in doing so, receives the truths of racial difference from the outer body” (Gilroy, 2004, p. 46).

Jessica: They say to us something about ‘your colour’ – and say to our friends they will catch our colour. They say that they will start to be black too. They say they DON’T want to be black! They say that we look really ugly and so will our friends. How our hair is really ugly and everything.

The quote from Jessica illustrates how she and her friends are treated differently because of her “colour” – and that her white friends navigate the dangers not only of being different and ugly by association, but also of actually catching “our colour”. This connects to racist images of blackness anchored in allusions to contagion, pollution and danger. It suggests that friendship networks may be subtly policed (by children and adults) to maintain essentialised categories and protect whiteness by prohibiting ‘mixing’ with non-white children. However, as I observed in the playground and as Jessica and her friends argue, there are children who choose to ignore the surveillance of their friendships and hence challenge the construction of racialised identities as exclusive and uniform.

Just as there are multiple ways of constructing and negotiating ‘race’, friends Tak (English Colombian, aged 11) and Mark (Bangladeshi, aged 11) assert that not all comments about “colour” are intended to be offensive or harmful. This extract comes after an account of racist abuse they experienced at a birthday party from a white boy called Timothy:

Author name: So why are people like that, like Timothy, why is he like that? Why are people racist?

Mark: Cos they are just jealous of our colour.

Tak: That is what some people say in my area, to cheer us up. That ‘don’t worry, they are just jealous, they just want to be your colour’.

Mark: Like my mum says, ‘if someone calls you a racist name, don’t listen to them, they just want to be your colour – and you have a lovely colour’.

Tak: There is this policeman who is from Cornwall who lives in our area, he is always cheering us up, he says ‘oh people are just jealous because they are not your colour’. So the whole area, sticks up for everyone. Our whole street sticks up for me and him. But some people ARE really racist.

We can see here how I (unintentionally) introduce an individualising account of racism – perhaps inviting the conclusion that “some people are really racist” while others may “stick up” for you, as Tak said. Despite my commitment to examining the dialogic and social production of racist discourse (following Condor, 2006), I have found that such common-place individualising representations of racism permeate

the research dialogues. Across the data there were many similar quotes to that above containing the idea that “colour” is something white people envy – both as individuals and as a group. Many of the children who had received comments about their skin colour had been told by adults that this was because whites were jealous of them.<sup>12</sup> What is significant here, in the experiences elicited by the vignette, is that even when they are depicted as “lovely”, “having such a nice tan” – they are collectively still *fixed* by the colour of their skin. They are thus *restricted* by the racist gaze – that makes white skin simultaneously invisible and normal.

Having said that, some white skin is in fact seen and marked by its association with difference and foreignness - for example, children with heritage from Italy and Portugal (who looked white) identified strongly with accounts of racism. More common still were constructions of the Irish as other, very salient in the children’s stories of racism in the school<sup>13</sup>, although there are extremely few pupils with Irish connections. What is revealing here is that even the racialised whites are literally *seen* as different. As racialisation is located on the body, white Irish children in the school (who I could not see as different to the white English children), were seen to *look* different, as Richard (white British, aged 8) asserts in response to my question:

Author name: So, when people pick on people because they look different, or sound different – have you seen that happen at this school?

Richard: No not really, but my friend comes from Ireland. And he got picked on cos he looks different kind of thing.

Hence ‘race’ becomes something that you can see, hear, touch - even smell.<sup>14</sup> While I was careful not to equate ‘looking different’ and ‘race’ in the vignette and so invite a naturalising representation of ‘race’, this connection is in fact implied in my question. Thus racialised difference becomes something that is

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<sup>12</sup> There are traces in these quotes of Fanon’s (1952) conceptualisation of the ambivalent racist gaze that simultaneously rejects, fears and desires the racialised other.

<sup>13</sup> Research by Connolly (1998) into racism at school produced similar findings.

<sup>14</sup> Richard also states that he does not believe one of his friends is Romanian, as his friend claims, and asserts that he is Indian – saying “I recognise the smell – because most Indian people eat curry all the time – so they smell”. This shows how racial difference can also *be made* in realms where no visual ‘other’ body is present.

non-negotiable and naturalised because it is seen in or on the body. However, as we have already observed, this simplistic representation of ‘race’ is often contested in participants’ narratives.

### Contesting ‘race’: “you have to be hardcore”

As we have seen, ‘race’ is both accepted and contested. In this section we see that ‘race’ is depicted as an unwelcome imposition, something that is constructed and has detrimental consequences. This is apparent in the discussion between myself and friends Jessica and Cathleen (both British Pakistani, both aged 10). This extract comes after we have discussed the vignette and after Jessica shares her experiences of racist bullying at school (discussed below).

Author name: Cathleen – have you ever seen anything like that?

Cathleen: No

Author name: Have you seen anything that you would say was racist?

*(Long pause.)*

Cathleen: Well, it’s not very nice. You hurt other people’s feelings.

Author name: So if someone said to you – what is racism? What would you say?

Jessica: I don’t think I know.

Cathleen: I think it is when people bully you because they don’t like your colour.

Jessica *(speaking quickly)*: Some people say to us – ‘where do you come from?’

Cathleen: Like they think we are from Africa or something. And we didn’t come from there. My parents came from Birmingham. Some say a lot of weird stuff just because we look different. Birmingham is not that different. I don’t like it when they say ‘where are you from’.

It is possible to say that these girls are refusing to be fixed by ‘race’: they reject the idea that they are different, they reject the anchoring of this difference in associations to Africa and they reject the racialised implication that they do not belong – and so constantly need to answer the question ‘where are you from?’. They, like other participants, described how it is was not simply individual children or adults who imposed difference on them: they spoke angrily of how the school as a whole could work in ways that made them feel different from the school community. For example, after a discussion about her experiences of racism at school with Kelley (white British, aged 11), Tonia (British Pakistani/Muslim, aged 12) says that “nasty” comments are tolerated in ways let racism and Islamophobia go unchallenged:

Tonia: Cos there was this time when I brought the Koran in, well a translation – so that the others could learn something about me. And Sharon was really nasty to me about it – and I was like “it’s my religion”. Then the teacher says – “if she has any nasty comments about it – say it to



herself, keep it to herself’. That is just really dumb! I think to show her that it is really wrong – she should have been excluded (*suspended or expelled*). Because if you are teaching children not to be racist, you have to be hardcore to show them what will happen if they are racist. You can’t just say “keep it to yourself”!

Despite the fact that research discussions with the staff at this school indicate that they were consciously committed to an effective anti-racist policy, we see how *both* anti-racism and racism nevertheless affect these children’s understanding of school policies and practices. Chelsea (Portuguese-Lebanese English, aged 10) gave another example of how teachers may sometimes reject or dismiss experiences of racist name-calling and aggression, stating that teachers “call us tale-tells and stuff – and say that we are lying”. This does not necessarily indicate that individual teachers are actively racist and resisting the general ethos of the school (though this is of course a possibility). Rather it exposes the insidious nature of racism, as a hegemonic representation deeply engrained into cultural and institutional practices (Connolly, 1998; Howarth, 2004) – even contexts and relationships where racism is explicitly rejected (Billig, 1995; Wetherell and Potter, 1992). It also suggests that the school is successful in its aim to educate pupils about racism, and hence the children’s resistance can be read as *both* a reaction to racialised practices *and* as a product of an institutionalised culture of anti-racism. The stories reveal a mature understanding of racism as a collective and institutional practice – as the children describe how particular versions of events may be questioned, marginalised and silenced quite subtly and how school practices may (inadvertently) locate the problem of racist bullying with the racialised other.

For instance, Jessica (British Pakistani, aged 10), told a story of being called a “blackie”, being pulled to the ground by her hair and then getting a detention herself “for causing trouble”. The implication is that if “people went to schools where everyone was the same colour then there wouldn’t be problems” as Laura (white British, aged 8) puts it. Hence racism can be seen as ‘the fault’ of the racialised other. In this way, the ‘other’ comes to embody danger; after a long discussion about the racist bullying they have experienced Sophie (Italian English, aged 10) and Chelsea (Portuguese-Lebanese English, aged 10) explain to me how sitting next to racialised others in class could be constructed as inviting “trouble”.

Author name: So is there racism in this school?

Sophie: Yeah – lots. Lots yeah. The English people, yeah – like ‘look at you - smelly’, or ‘you are really ugly’. And when they touch someone they will ‘ooh! I touched her! I need to wash my hands!’ And all that stuff. It’s like no one wants to sit next to them or anything. Also – like they don’t want to get into trouble.

Chelsea: The teachers say that too: don’t sit next to her – you will only get into trouble.

Just as Jessica described how ‘race’ could be caught (p. 13), here ‘race’ is seen as trouble – and so trouble can also be caught from the racialised other. On the one hand we could say that these stories illustrate how institutionalised practices may work to underplay the gravity of racism, to exclude the voices and experiences of children constructed as ‘other’ and so maintain the racialised operation of power at school<sup>15</sup>. And yet we also must to acknowledge the context of the production of knowledge, and see that the school’s explicit focus on anti-racism has furnished pupils with a critical awareness of the operation and complexity of racism – understanding its negative impact in society generally and on interactions within the school, the management of racist bullying and violence and on themselves.

Indeed, one of the most poignant aspects of the ways that the children problematised racism was in response to my questions on ‘how racism made them feel’. Their accounts suggest that representations of ‘race’ penetrate and potentially damage their sense of self, belonging and security (see also McKown, 2004). They spoke of being “ashamed” of their identity and wanting to change aspects of themselves that marked them as different – wanting to ‘pass’ as Goffman would say. For instance – children spoke about changing their names or accents that would indicate their association with ‘other’ cultures. As common research practice participants were asked to give a pseudonym for use in the writing up and presentation of the data. It is significant that even children who were vocal about the “stupidity” of racism chose a name that could appear to be ‘typically white British’ – such as Jessica, Cathleen, John or Mark - to replace their own names that could indicate non-white British parentage<sup>16</sup>. Predictably but sadly these children also

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<sup>15</sup> For a more detailed study of the subtle dynamics of racialised exclusion at school see Howarth (2004) and Langhout and Mitchell (2007).

<sup>16</sup> It is important to stress that the selection of pseudonyms was done at the start of the research activity, and so they were not influenced by my choice of names or the characters of Sarah and Faranaz in the vignette.

spoke about wanting to change skin colour, revealing the devastating psychological as well as physical violence of racism <sup>17</sup>. They spoke of unhappiness, feeling alone, being scared and angry. Garth (aged 10) whose Roma identity made him vulnerable to racist comments from both adults and pupils, described how this made him feel:

Author name: Ok – and how do you think that racism makes people feel?

Garth: Alone – like they have been chucked down a massive hole and they are in a bottomless pit.

Author name: Is that how it makes you feel?

Garth: Yeah – most of the time. They make me feel like I don't belong and am not welcome. I just feel different.

The emotive layers of this extract are lost in transcription and it is easy to dismiss its psychological weight. Sitting with Garth, however, and having observed his loneliness at school over a period of months, it was painful to hear such a young child express the debilitating effects of prejudice and to wonder how deeply the stories elicited across the study resonated for other participants. Towards the end of the research activity with Kelley (white British, aged 11), Tonia (British Pakistani/Muslim, aged 12) told us that:

Tonia: I heard this story about this little girl. She was only very, very young. I think it was a long time ago. She had had a lot of racism bullies picking on her, calling her names, throwing stones at her. So she was really, really sad. She decided that she wanted to be white. She killed herself.

Author name: Did she? Where was that?

Tonia: I don't know. It was somewhere here, but a long time ago. Anyway, she wanted to be white so she threw a pot of white paint on herself and it didn't work. So she cut her wrists. They did take her to hospital – but she died anyway. So the racists – they killed her. It was really, really sad.

Tonia's story contains the pain of not being able to control how one is seen, the imposition of difference and a rejection of self. We see here the “psychic violence caused by the internalisation of racisms and feelings of powerlessness” (Archer and Francis, 2003, p. 402). Little, it seems, may have changed since the time of the Clarks research in 1930s USA:

“Almost nowhere in the larger society do minority children find their own dignity as human beings respected or protected. ... Understandably they begin to question whether they themselves and their group are worthy of no more respect from the larger society than they

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<sup>17</sup> The children know that racists “can rape you, or even kill you” (Cathleen, British Bangladeshi, aged 10) and acknowledge their own vulnerability to such hostilities. Another child implied that his father had been a victim of racist murder.

receive. These conflicts, confusions and doubts give rise under certain circumstances to self-hatred and rejection of their own group”

Clark, 1963, p. 64.

This shows us that what is potentially damaging about racialising representations, is not simply the content of such, but the actual processes of objectification and essentialisation that denies the racialised other agency and self-determination. As John 2 (Muslim, aged 10) asserts, rejecting racist representations outright is simply not possible:

John 2: The thing is about racism – if you are called black – you can’t change that. If you are called fat – you can go to Weight Watchers, if you are called black there is nothing you can do – except maybe go for skin surgery, plastic surgery. But I am not sure that people would want to not that, if they are happy, just because other people are racist.

In saying this, both John 2 and Tonia (above) are contesting the fixity of the racist gaze. While we do have to recognise that their identity and esteem, as others in the study, is marked by the racist gaze, in telling their stories they problematise ‘race’, disrupt its gaze and so rupture its hold over their own identities. The psychological damage of racism is then an important but partial aspect of the children’s experience. While it is true that representations can “constrain and narrow the possibilities of human action” (Jovchelovitch, 1996, p. 122), this is only a part of the story. For while the children speak of wanting to change, wanting to be white and wanting to belong in a way that the essentialism of ‘race’ does not allow, they also speak with anger of resistance and of strategies to undermine the technologies of racism.

These examples bring to light the creative and collaborative ways the children and I manipulated representations that *race* in order to challenge and resist the racist associations and practices that invade and restrict our social relationships and self-identities. Problematizing the operation of racism in these ways disrupts the ‘reality’ and fixity of racialised difference. When debated, contested and rejected, as we have seen here, racism cannot have the weight and psychological impact that it had when ‘race’ is constructed as natural, real and essential. We can see this dialogic character of racism, in this discussion between Matthew, John (both white British, aged 9) and myself, early in the research activity:

Author name: So why did the other girls (*in the story*) pick on Faranaz?

Matthew: Because of her accent.

John: And she has a weird name.

Author name: Aha. So why does that make some people pick on her?

John: Um, because they sound funny.

Matthew: They sound funny to them – but they don't inside, they don't sound funny to the person who is making it.

John: And they are different to the other people.

What is interesting is that when John asserts that difference is real (“they are different”, “funny” and “weird”), Matthew qualifies this, depicting racialised difference as a product of one’s perspective. So it is not that “they” *are* naturally different, but “they” *appear to be* different to others. Matthew also talked about the bullying he had received because of his “ginger” hair, and it is possible that these experiences have made him more reflective about the operation of bullying than John.<sup>18</sup>

#### A rather hopeful conclusion

It can come as no surprise that non-white children who have direct experience of racism have the understanding and the motivation to challenge the ideological production of ‘race’ (McKown, 2004). What is interesting is that there are white children such as Matthew whose own experiences of bullying (being ‘ginger’ or overweight), experiences of racialisation (being white Irish, Italian or Roma), experiences of witnessing racism towards their friends or significant others (such as football heroes and other celebrities) and participating in cooperative activities in mixed groups appear to have given them the social psychological tools with which to problematise racist discourses and practices (as other research has found: Aboud and Fenwick, 1999; McGlothlin and Killen, 2005; Nesdale *et al*, 2005). It is not, then, only children who are positioned as racialised others who challenge racist thinking (as McKown and Weinstein, 2003, have assumed). And it is neither a matter of situating individual children as producers, carriers *or* as victims of racist discourse. This reading falls into the trap of locating racism as ‘the problem’ of certain individuals (Wetherell and Potter, 1992). The children’s stories reveal that racism and anti-racism are

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<sup>18</sup> As McKown and Weinstein (2003) have highlighted, “stereotype consciousness might be necessary for children from nonstigmatised groups to develop a personal commitment to racial tolerance” (p. 512).

better understood as dialogic social representations, used by the same participants (myself included) in quite contradictory ways. Hence, we cannot position people as ‘more’ or ‘less’ able to contest the representations that *race*, but we need to see the dialectic between reified and contestory representations of ‘race’ more as a product of the dynamics of dialogue, identity, context and school culture.

What this demonstrates is the importance of context, dialogue and debate: without such we would not encounter alternative positions, other ways of being and new ways of questioning (Marková, 2003). Without relationship and dialogue we would not develop resistant identities, counter-arguments and “narratives of survival, ... narratives of how individuals have managed to turn their negative experiences into useful social and cultural capital” (Rastas, 2005, p. 158). The research activity invited such a dialogic and argumentative approach to ‘race’ – bringing out contradiction, ambivalence and resistance to ‘race’. Moreover, the general ethos of the school, apparent in school assembly and classroom discussions, advocating tolerance, respect for different perspectives and anti-racism, is likely to have played a significant role in the problematisation of ‘race’ in the research narratives. Importantly, such discussions (within the context of the school generally and the research activity in particular) may enable pupils not only to engage with *the* other, but also to engage with discourses, representations and practices *that* other.

Arguably one could say that some academic constructions of racial categories mirror everyday beliefs about ‘race’ and social categories in general – often essentialising and reifying ‘race’. Indeed, essentialism has been found to play a crucial role in prejudice from the early, foundational studies of Allport (1954) and Sherif (1948), and recently Condor *et al* (2006) and Verkuyten (2003a). Medin and Ortony (1989) coined the term ‘psychological essentialism’ to refer to the belief among laypeople that many social categories have essences. Rothbart and Taylor (1992) also assert that people often treat social categories as if they are natural kinds and use bodily features as evidence of the ‘naturalness’ of gender and ‘race’. Hirschfeld (1996) argues that this is actually an innate process, a ‘human kind module’: a distinct cognitive system that attributes essences to social categories, exemplified in his own work on ‘race’. In a

thoughtful paper by Haslam *et al* (2000) they suggest that we need to combat essentialism in everyday thinking by “reducing the *reification* of the category in question by showing its internal diversity, its similarity to and overlap with other categories, and its lack of any underlying distinctiveness” (p. 125).

My argument is that this is precisely what we need to do in our research practice. If Hirschfeld is correct in his belief that we are cognitively predisposed to essentialise social categories, and if we accept that there is no essential basis to the concept of distinct racial groups, then we need to be vigilant against this tendency to essentialise, reify or naturalise ‘race’ in all areas of interaction including *our professional practice*.

As Gilroy (2004) discusses, racism is often studied in terms of fixity - its continuing hold over the ways in which we categorise others and ourselves (e.g. Durrheim and Dixon, 2005; Verkuyten and Thijs, 2002). In this paper I have attempted to provide a strong critique of the ways in which such research can, often inadvertently, reify representations that *race* and so help to make ideologies of ‘race’ meaningful. This is not a new criticism, but I am unaware of psychological research that attempts to look at the production of ‘race’ in the actual process of doing (one’s own) research<sup>19</sup>. While Social Psychology has played a central role in demonstrating the debilitating damage that racism causes the human psyche, we also need to explore the conditions for problematising and transforming representations that threaten to limit or fracture the possibilities of self and so move towards a “systematic denaturing of race” (Gilroy, 2004, p. 63).

In fact this lofty objective resonates with early Social Psychological theory and research (e.g. Katz and Braly’s work on ‘racial stereotyping’ and the Clarks’ work on segregation in education) where the Social Psychological consequences of racism were exposed and, to a limited extent, challenged (Richards, 1997).

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<sup>19</sup> For an excellent text on the “political and methodological danger of an unproblematic reliance upon categorical approaches to ‘race’” relevant to the social sciences as a whole, see Gunaratnam (2003, p.73).

However, it is not simply a critical analysis of racism that I advocate, but a critical analysis of ‘race’. This is a significant difference. What I offer is a theoretical and a methodological departure: a focus on the collective production of ‘race’ and on the role of context, dialogue and debate in maintaining, reifying and challenging ‘race’ as a meaningful concept and a consequential social practice. This is examined a) within the stories given by the participants of their everyday experiences and b) within the context of the research encounter itself.

In this project, not only do we see that the children challenge racism as a “stupid”, imposed construct, but more importantly we see that they may reject ‘race’ and so reject particular identities imposed on them and their friends and thereby create new ways of being seen, being identified and being connected. This analysis demands that they are seen as active agents in the (re)production and transformation of representations that *race*. One of the youngest white boys in this study (Richard, aged 8) said that “I hope we won’t have to understand racism one day”. While this can be interpreted in many ways – a possibility is that he hopes one day racism will have lost its grip on our collective psyche, ways of seeing each other and positioning ourselves. This would allow us to see ‘race’ as the “complex, unstable product” of racism, rather than as it is often understood “an eternal cause of racism” (Gilroy, 2004, p. 16). So rather than focus on a Social Psychology of ‘race’ or even racism, I suggest we need to assert a Social Psychology of racialisation and resistance – and to explore our collective role in its production and defence.

While I agree with Fuss’ point that “any critical position which successfully deconstructs ‘race’ as an empirical fact but fails to account for its continuing political efficacy is ultimately inadequate” (1989, p. 91), I nevertheless suggest that if Social Psychology is to contribute to anything beyond *maintaining* the significance of racism in social cognition, subjectivity and cultural practices, it is precisely to these very *hopeful* moments of problematising both ‘race’ and racism in the everyday and in the context of doing research that we need to attend. As Fuss advises, we need to “work with ‘race’ as a political concept



*knowing* it is a biological fiction” (*ibid*) in the process of designing, analysing and disseminating research on ‘race’.

This would compliment recent work that examines precisely discourses that *race*: how these are constructed, embodied and sometimes contested, such as the seminal work by Billig (1995) on nationalism, Augoustinos *et al* (1999) on racist discourse and Condor (2006) on racist talk. For a rigorously *Social Psychology*, we must examine these discourses and practices at both an individual and a collective level, as Rosenberg has argued:

“a truly integrative social or political psychology must take this complex relationship between the individual structuring of meaning on the one hand and action on the other hand and the collective structuring of meaning and action on the other as its point of departure”

Rosenberg, 2003, p. 434.

In this research I emphasise the collective structuring of meaning by examining the context of the production of knowledge (both in terms of the culture and practices of the school and in terms of the research itself) and the dialogic and argumentative character of representations that *race*. What is original and hence challenging in this project is my focus on the collaborative construction, reification *and* contestation of ‘race’ between myself as researcher and the young participants. Boldly, perhaps, I would suggest that Social Psychology must play more attention to the social construction of ‘contact’ and racialised categories, examine how these historical legacies continue to inform implicit assumptions within research designs and so expose the subtleties of racism within the institutionalised practices of academic research. For if we do not, we shall continue Psychology’s history of engagement with “forms of knowledge production that invariably supported stereotypical notions of ‘race’” (Stevens, 2003, p.191) and so continue to produce a racialised framework where racism’s logic is defended and extended.

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