

Theory and practice in the field of race and race thinking: Critical reflections from, and for, South Africa and beyond

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Funding for this paper was provided by the Maurice Webb Trust and facilitated by the Centre for Critical Research on Race and Identity (**ccrri**), my thanks to both these organisations.
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Introduction

In South Africa researching race¹ and race thinking² takes on a particular specificity. It is entangled in the project of nation building, deeply entrenched in politics, written into policies, continues to mediate everyday interactions, and questions how we define our humanity in this geographic location. For those interested in historic analysis, the distant and recent past provides rich evidence as to how and why racial ontologies and racist policies can shape state structures and life experiences. The present of course also holds interest; South Africa has undergone a unique moment of regime change that builds on non-racialism as a ‘founding provision’ on constitutional paper, but grapples with the practicalities of moving out of the horrors of Apartheid towards a democratic state.³ Whilst acknowledging that researching race and race thinking is an important endeavour in this context, this article argues that as researchers we need to take cognisance of our own practices in this field. We need critically to examine the rituals of research and how they interact with, solidify or challenge the meanings attached to race. One way of doing this is to move beyond the present and ask ourselves how we envision the future, or more specifically, how our current research epistemologies and methodologies are writing future understandings of race.

¹ I do not place inverted commas around the word race in this article as the content of the paper clearly illustrates that race is a social construct and not a given biological or cultural category into which people can be allocated. I do however place inverted commas around the racial categories used in South Africa, such as ‘white’, ‘black’, ‘indian’ and ‘coloured’, or when the word race denotes an act of classification itself, such as referring to a ‘race group’. The inverted commas here are a reminder of the problematic and contested process of treating individuals as representatives or members of a group that has been assigned homogenous and essentialist characteristics.

² I use the term race thinking as being synonymous with racial ontologies where the starting premise is the belief that all humans can be categorised according to a given racial type or group. Whilst the notion of which groups of people form a ‘race’, and the essentialist characteristics attributed to racial groups changes depending on the social context, the core belief in separate ‘race groups’ underpins all these social variations. Ontology I believe best describes the strength and prevalence of race thinking in South Africa, where as David Theo Goldberg suggests “[r]ace under apartheid operated not merely *like* or *as if* a religion. It was also, and more basically, a theology in the classic conception” (2009:526, emphasis in original).

³ The South African constitution can be viewed at <http://www.info.gov.za/documents/constitution/1996/96cons1.htm>

Undertaking this exercise requires reflection on the role of research as an agent for change, deliberate or consequential, in state institutions and policies. To open these debates we need to question the theoretical underpinnings in the field of race and race thinking, and then confront the challenges of moving these critical reflections into our research practices. Whilst ambitious for one article, analysing at a macro level how race is conceptualised in the social sciences, as well as how these conceptions are played out and reshaped in the micro context of the research process, is necessary to provide useful tools from which scholars and researchers may tackle the exciting but ethically challenging field of researching race in South Africa, and elsewhere.

Why race still matters

With a colonial history soaked in racial codification (Seidman, 1999:426) and subsequently entrenched by Apartheid, it is not surprising that sixteen years after the first democratic elections race still matters in South Africa. As Apartheid built on and refined colonial and scientific discourses of difference, race was chiselled into the everyday experiences of all South Africans. In present day South Africa race continues to be intertwined with thinking on culture, gender, language and economic income, amongst other social identities. That race still counts is also evident in the continued use of racial categories in state policies and data collection. In short, this form of taxonomy continues to “say something” about our sense of self and other (although what that “something” is, is widely contested). Of course race is not always an important identity in South Africa; similarly it may start out as a mediating factor in social interactions and become irrelevant as the interaction draws on other commonalities and differences that hold more value in a certain social context. However, the frequency in which race is used in state, media and popular discourses, as well as its embeddedness in other social identities, often highlights it as the primary identity through which South Africans interact and negotiate power relations and resources (Alexander, 2007:92; Bouillon, 2002:18). Apartheid is part of a living past; there are still generations of South Africans who experienced its violent oppression and unequal privileges first hand. Furthermore, complex networks rooted in Apartheid segregation continue to provide social and cultural capital, which in turn serve to nurture privilege, entrench poverty, and reproduce ideas around racial difference. We need to remind ourselves that all people in South Africa, past and present, were and are affected by the sickness of the previous racist state. Whilst this may be seen as a product of our history, it is also important not to lose sight that the current manifestations of these identities were constructed through a long process of state engineering. Remembering this opens up future possibilities. For this reason understanding

how and why race continues to matter is an important social endeavour, both in terms of social justice and in working towards the constitutional goal of a “non-racial society”.

Contemporary research into social inequalities and justice highlights how existing state practices serve to reinforce segregation of people by ‘race group’, for example government low cost housing projects for the most part maintains the spatial mapping of Apartheid (Murray, 2008:101), nullifying opportunities for creating open and diverse spaces of interaction. Here past and present structures synergise enabling the solidification of racialised ontologies. Another small but important example of this is the police Accident Report form inherited from the cumbersome bureaucracy of the pre-1994 government. As of 2010 this form, filled out at your nearest police station, requires both drivers’ ‘race’, even for a minor car accident. Why? For the most part these cases are handled by insurance companies that simply require a police accident report number – the value this particular variable adds to an insurance claim or even police statistics is surely laughable. This stowaway of the past is not innocent.⁴ It reiterates that race matters in the present. It does this through demanding a dual performance of racial classification: firstly, it requires self-identifying from the reporter of the accident, indicating that race is a noteworthy part of self identity. Secondly, it requires labelling the other party, and here the reporter of the accident is given the expertise and authority to categorise another person. That both these performances are played out at an office of the state - the local police station - gives them the ‘legitimacy’ of a legal requirement.

The ritual of confidently assigning race to the self and to others, repeated in so many official and non-official forms, is just one way in which race is tacitly normalised as part of the South African experience. All South Africans are expected to tick one of at least four racial boxes in a variety of bureaucratic forms, the state census, university applications, medical records, accident report forms at the police office. In addition the state requests racial demographics from many organizations and invariably a manager, teacher or human resource staff will collate racial demographics on their staff or students. This practice of racial self-classification, coupled with the bureaucratic classification of others through ‘visual hunches’ closely parallels the classification practices of Apartheid (Alexander, 2007:100). Once again race is in the eye of the beholder, a gaze that continues to have profound consequences for people’s lived experiences. Researchers also engage in this practice when they target participants because of their perceived race, often as an attempt to ‘represent’ people’s

⁴ David Theo Goldberg (2009:515) talks about the “haunting of the new South Africa by race”, but I prefer to think of these past objects as more tangible agents since they continue to effect and infect structures and institutes rather than appearing as troublesome ghosts.

views in societies, sometimes in a blatant desire to make a claim about how 'black', 'white', 'indian' or 'coloured' people think, feel, act or select products for consumption.

That this type of box checking has, for the most part, remained unchanged or unchallenged, suggests that for many South Africans this type of information is not just necessary but expected. Yet, what learning does this example hold for contemporary researchers? If these small left over check boxes of the past impact on how we see ourselves in the present, then we need to think very carefully about how our present actions may be creating check boxes for our future. If race mattered then, and race matters now, how do we wish it to matter going forward? Exercises in imagining the future are part utopian thinking and part social engineering. This type of 'imagineering' asks critical questions of scientists researching issues of race in contemporary South Africa. It demands reflection on the types of check boxes we may unthinkingly, or purposefully, be constructing in twenty, forty, one hundred years from now. As researchers we need to question how our epistemological and methodological frameworks re-enforce, subvert and/or challenge essentialist notions of race within various publics, and more specifically ourselves, our readers and our respondents.

The complexities of researching race and race thinking

A racialised ontology deploys a taxonomy of difference where humankind is seen as made up of distinct racial groups. Even though there is no scientific base for this ontology, hence the understanding of race as a social construct, belief in a race thinking paradigm impacts on people's lived experiences and produces consequences as if it were real (Mason, 1999:19). The pervasive and tacit use of race within everyday discourse suggests it carries widespread understanding, to some extent this negates the need for a clear definition since it is something everybody 'knows' (Appiah, 1990:3). Even within the social sciences writers analyse and examine the concepts of racism, racialism and race thinking without outlining or agreeing upon the definition of race itself (Mason, 1999:21). Definitions of race are often constructed using a few historical references or context specific understandings, and as such may present too narrow an explanation (Miles, 1989:60). On the other hand generic explanations of racism and racialism requires understanding of the dialectical nature of the human psyche, where rational logic and irrational belief systems simultaneously reside in the individual (Appiah, 1990:8), as well as how these ideologies are reinforced through context specific social structures. The complexities and dynamic nature of social constructs makes the concept of race problematic, if not impossible, to define. Whilst hard to define, ideas of race are seldom flexible in popular discourse and, as will be discussed later, are usually powerfully linked to essentialist notions of bodily and/or cultural difference. Nevertheless

undertaking a serious exercise to fix a definition of race would be inherently flawed since social constructs are dynamic and dialectical ideologies that inform, and are informed by, people's interactions. Any exercise that attempts this should also carry a flashing warning sign, for if history is to teach us anything, the desire to define difference often acts as justification for gross human atrocities. In light of this there are more pressing questions to ask, as Hacking (1999:5) reminds us when analysing social constructs: "[d]on't ask for the meaning, ask what's the point".

What is more important is how this construct shifts and reconstitutes in a multitude of power strategies depending on the broader social, political and economic milieu. Here lies the heart of the complexity of researching race. Any analysis of race faces the difficult task of unpacking an ideology of difference that simultaneously incorporates discourses of science, biology, culture, religion, nationality, gender and class, as well as numerous other political, social and economic identities. Methodologies that specifically isolate a particular facet of social identity through directly focusing on questions of race (either in interviews or questionnaires) are in some ways inherently troubled by trying to untangle a single variable from the complex relationship or mishmash of ideas played out in race thinking in South African, and arguably in many other societies. The emotive and historically destructive use of race in South Africa, and other countries, may suggest that race is at the centre of debates around identity, but it is important to note that this is not *always* the case. Of course lived experiences are far more complex, layered and nuanced in terms of how people both construct and appropriate identity. The fluidity of identity within various social contexts requires recognition that specific aspects of identity do not always position themselves as primary. It is the very interconnectedness of multiple intertwined identities that is important to understand, and isolating only race, ethnicity, gender or class runs the risk of incorrectly squashing people's lived experiences into narrow boxes and obscuring emergent identities.⁵ If we take cognisance of this then careful epistemological deliberation is demanded.

The dilemmas of researching race I – the theoretical debates

The academic debate around whether race is a legitimate and useful category for research at times polarizes into two camps, both of which share a social constructivist base. One position makes a case for the continued use of racial categories in social science research,

⁵ See Essed (2001:498) for an analysis of how even anti-racist movements concerned with equality and eradicating racism can fall into this trap of squeezing social experiences through a racial prism, not only does this stifle the aim of social justice but "[o]ne-sided emphasis on only race or ethnicity underscores the very determinism that is characteristic of racism in the first place".

whilst the other calls for a post-race research agenda where race is erased from the research agenda.

Advocates for continuing the use of racial categories argue that these categories are powerful identities that mediate people's experience and produce structural frameworks in social institutions, therefore they are legitimate and meaningful categories from which to collect data, particularly since they are used to overtly and tacitly organize power in society (American Sociological Association, 2003). Eliminating racial categories from research would therefore limit social scientists' ability to expose unequal and unjust practices. Likewise it would rob the oppressed of viable political identities from which to rally against dominant and exclusionary ideologies and policies.⁶ These polarised positions are heavily influenced by the political programme of Multiculturalism, particularly in research coming from Europe, Canada and the USA. Multiculturalism attempts to address the lived reality of changing global spaces where many different social identities emerge, transform or are perceived as being under attack, and is seen as a contemporary liberal redress to past and present ethnocentric Western practices. These debates speak of a tension in liberal politics, between a neutral approach that favours individual over group identities, and the politics of group recognition found in multiculturalism, where group rights are seen as fundamental to the good life of the individual. As Appiah (2005:65) points out, "in political and moral thinking nowadays it has become commonplace to suppose that a person's personal projects can be expected to be shaped by such features of his or her identity and that this is, if not morally required, then at least morally permissible". Increasingly, for both politicians and civil society, the ever-finer line between recognizing diverse groupings in society and avoiding perceptions of difference and exclusion must be carefully navigated (Brah, 1992:141).

In 2003 the American Sociology Association (ASA), responding to some of the arguments presented above, published a statement offering a rationale for their support of the continuation of using racial categories in social science research. They do however recognize that some research may be used to further racial differentiation and discrimination and suggest that "although racial categories are legitimate subjects of empirical sociological investigation, it is important to recognize the danger of contributing to the popular conception of race as biological" (American Sociology Association, 2003).

In my view this is too narrow an understanding of how race is socially constructed. Apartheid laws in South Africa clearly illustrate this. At the end of the Second World War there was an international divergence away from openly racist practice and policy. Appalled

⁶ See Don Robotham's (2005) response to Paul Gilroy's concept of Cosmopolitanism as one example of this argument.

by the atrocities of the Nazi regime, the scientific community vigorously started to dismantle the notion of race as a biological fact (Stepan, 2003:334). Despite this South Africa was cementing race into every nook and cranny of state architecture (Boonzaier and Sharp, 1988:63). This is not to suggest that South African intellectual and political minds were not affected by the change in biological thinking about race. The Population Registration Act of 1950, admitted the impossibility of establishing a precise scientific marker for race, and instead used the far more efficient and flexible tool of social standing to categorise people into fixed 'racial' categories (Posel, 2001:55). Indeed, a substantial portion of social science research, often used to support Apartheid legislation, focused on documenting these social and cultural differences – for example the creation of *Volkekunde* that focused on studying and essentialising cultural difference (Dubow, 2006:266). Cultural explanations, however, are often based on visual identification and interpretations of the body that enable assignment to a cultural grouping. In South Africa racial classification during the Population Registration Act was left to state officials who through a hodge podge of somatic 'evidence', such as skin colour and hair texture, and social connections, such as language and community networks, reclassified people into one of four racial categories (Posel, 2001). Aligning race along cultural, class or national lines during this period was not unique to South Africa. As Gilroy (2000:24) warns, this bio-cultural model "compounds rather than resolves the problems arising from associating race with embodied or somatic variation". Here the body is reinterpreted through the banal socialization of race thinking in everyday experiences, interactions with social institutions and state apparatus and the lived reality of social inequality. The eye then is trained to 'see the obvious', and utilise selected visual differences. On this point Gilroy (2000:42) succinctly notes "when it comes to the visualization of discrete racial groups, a great deal of fine-tuning has been required". This interpretation of race focuses on cultural collectively whilst simultaneously drawing from the older discourse of the biological, thereby reframing, yet firmly maintaining, a racial ontology of difference; continuing to provide a mechanism through which to structure and explain social inequalities. This strategy of alluding to biological difference through cultural, economic and political differences meant that scientific findings disproving the biological existence of race did not play a primary role in ending Apartheid.

Taking this into account it is vital to acknowledge that 'culture' when used as a homogenizing category of race thinking is as damaging and provides as much fuel for both structural inequality and everyday discriminatory interactions. We need to expand the critique to move beyond, and indeed be highly critical of, research that contributes to any fixing of race within

essentialist categories, whether overtly biological or not. As Gunaratnam (2003:29) points out:

[p]rocesses of essentialism and their uses in research can be witnessed in the driving impetus to categorize the bodies, experiences, practices, and even the thoughts, of individuals and groups in relation to 'race' and ethnicity.

It is important to note that research that uses racial categories in an uncontested manner may well resonate with the lived experience of individuals and groups (Gunaratnam, 2003:33), since it echoes the essentialist notions found in popular and common-sense understandings of race. However, scholars who call for a post-race position raise the concern that, even where social justice is an objective, research of this kind can simultaneously re-enforce the notion of race as fixed social categories, unwillingly oiling the very mechanics of oppression they wish to dismantle. The ASA (2003) stance that “[a]s long as Americans routinely sort each other into racial categories and act on the basis of those attributions, research on the role of race and race relations in the United States falls squarely within this scientific agenda” is simultaneously and problematically passive and active. Passive, firstly, in that it seems to suggest that social scientists are not part of this American construction but simply *comment on* what Americans do.⁷ Secondly, actively choosing not to attempt to reshape ontological and epistemological understandings of race has as many political implications as attempting to move society beyond race.

For example, is it sufficient for a researcher/s simply to state that race is a social construct, yet continue to identify participants as belonging to a 'race group'? Likewise, acknowledging the social construction of race and then proceeding to present findings that assume to represent the experiences of a 'racial grouping', may serve to solidify the perceived homogeneity of a group rather than unpack why, how, and to whose benefit these constructions are maintained. As Nayak (2006:416) persuasively warns, acknowledging identities – for example 'whiteness' as a continuous and fluid social process whilst securing data from an identified racialised individual, a 'white' person – tightens the screws that trap identity into the body politic. Certainly the ontology of social constructivism has failed to diminish the multitude of essentialist performances of race in the economic, political, social

⁷ A similar kind of rationale about the objectivity of counting race in the American census was used in the twentieth century. As Melissa Nobles (2000:1741) points out this served to divorce census taking from the extensive history of creating race through census categories and instead posited that the census merely “registered the evident existence of race”.

and cultural arenas (Nayak, 2006:412). It is from this position that a post-race stance asks the question 'can we do more?'

Whilst post-race theory can be critiqued, not least because of the tautology implicit in its name, it rightly demands reflection on current academic practices, and presents a "provocative question: can we re-write race into erasure?" (Nayak, 2006:427). Acknowledging the interconnectivity of identities suggests that power relations and structures that create and feed inequalities also require a more holistic analysis. Indeed, using race as the lens to expose these practices and frameworks may in fact only highlight a few small elements of these mechanisms of power, or obscure significant causes of inequality. Methodologies for research into race or race thinking, through necessity, need to be a continuous process of critical reflection; open to new kinds of tools for understanding moments of identity construction *in situ* instead of reproducing existing racial categories. A methodology, in other words, that is comfortable to be continually under construction, one that interacts and develops with, rather than delimits, the research process. Here deliberation on the epistemological complexities, practicalities and ethical dilemmas in doing research on social identities will enable the methodology to reshape itself in reflective ways. A methodology of this kind could conceivably provide a more contextualised and embedded analysis of power relations; in short, strengthening rather than weakening social researchers' ability to 'speak truth to power'.⁸ This has exciting political and social possibilities outside the realm of academia. So, for Paul Gilroy (2000:13), moving beyond race as any form of legitimate category opens possibilities where "action against racial hierarchies can proceed more effectively". For example, whilst race may be an important concept in some projects it is also conceivable that other primary indicators such as income group, or more specific indicators such as access to clean water, electricity and medical care are better indicators of areas that require social and economic upliftment and infrastructure delivery than habitually recording racial statistics. In many ways we sit in a unique position where "[t]he large area of overlap between 'race' and 'class' in South Africa makes this approach possible" (Alexander, 2007:102).⁹ Taking this into consideration continuing to use racial categories in research appears to be more an epistemological habit rather than necessity for social justice.

⁸What Radhakrishnan (cited in Gunaratnam 2003:35) envisions as "empowerment and enfranchisement of contingent, heterogeneous 'identities'".

⁹ For a more nuanced exploration of some of the problematic and strategic integrations of class and race in South Africa see Maré (2003:15).

Of course presenting this dilemma as two opposing schools is not productive, polarised arguments can serve to simply maintain current practices rather than fuel innovation and productive contestation in a field. It is crucial to recognize the dangers of both these polarities, since the intentional neglect *and* the insistence of difference cause extensive damage to individuals and groups within societies (Beall, 1997:10). This I would argue is of particular concern in South Africa where there is a discord between a state that presents itself as non-racial yet continues to preside over a nation that bears - to use Goldberg's (2009:529) term - a formal racial "structural imprint". It is important to stress here that the choice is not *between* exposing inequality and moving beyond race, but rather "[w]e need to recognise and care about lived experiences of 'race' and ethnicity, and we also need to resist and challenge the appetite for essentialism in research" (Gunaratnam, 2003:34). Indeed, it is more useful to think of post-race theory as an extension of, rather than competitor to, research that utilises racial categories (Nayak, 2006:414). Thinking in this way offers a more valuable discussion that calls for attentiveness and criticality about the way we conduct research, what we think we know, how we ask questions, and how we choose to write up and publish findings. In short, tackling the epistemological heart of what it means to carry out research on race.

Gilroy's (2000), Nayak's (2006) and Gunaratnam's (2003) arguments draw inspiration from mostly a European setting where their work responds to discourses of minorities in society, yet it still holds relevance in relation to South Africa. Here the darkest side of race thinking lurks in the recent past, and the present repetitive performances of race as meaningful difference (in policy, state institutions, advertising and communications, as well as social interactions) continues to create a disjuncture between the constitutional goal of non-racialism and everyday experience. In this context social scientists cannot afford an uncritical and/or passive agenda towards research on race. At the turn of the century Gary Seidman (1999:434) bemoaned the fact that "[A]t the individual level, we have remarkably little sense of how South Africans experienced, responded to, or even challenged apartheid's rigid racial categories in their daily lives".¹⁰ This statement holds true for contemporary South Africa: how are people in this new democracy 'experiencing, responding to or challenging the continuation of apartheid's rigid racial categories in their daily lives?' Whilst there is little doubt that exclusionary and essentialist practices and structures still exist within South Africa, there is also change, a change that requires new epistemologies. As Sarah Nuttall (2004:731) accurately observes, we need to "find a way of accounting for the

¹⁰Lee Stone and Yvonne Erasmus's report *Race thinking and the law in post-1994 South Africa* (2008) is one example of research that does attempt this.

transformations that are also taking place". Moving beyond research that uncritically relies and builds on racial categories and rather investigates how identities are reformulated in either rapidly or gradually transforming spaces enables glimpses into possible future social relationships. Leaving this unexplored in favour of studying 'race relations' means the opportunities of nurturing alternate and less essentialist experiences are lost to social scientist and policy makers alike.

The role of research?

Research that is open to these complexities offers important insights in how racialised identities are being dismantled or reconstituted in unanticipated ways, which in turn challenges and subverts the ontology of recognisable and differentiated 'races' and their use in state structures. Research on how and why race thinking is reproduced and/or transformed or subverted in the context of everyday lived experiences may initiate the first formative move away from a society where many micro and macro interactions are still mediated through a racial lens. Indeed there are already emergent identities that reject racial stereotypes, forming collectives around shared experiences that better reflect a post apartheid context. One way that race may lose its saliency is that emergent identities better suited to negotiate local, regional and global power networks will forge new commonalities. Pockets of this possibility could be seen in the labour and anti-apartheid movements during the 1970s and 1980s, where at times race was rejected as a mechanism for mobilisation in favour of collectives protesting as "students, workers, township residents, women" (Seidman, 1999: 428). Post 1994 South Africa has also seen large social movements mobilized around health and medical treatment, such as the Treatment Action Campaign.¹¹ Likewise environmental, and anti-globalisation movements are seen as building new commonalities across social divides.

In a similar vein authors such as Gilroy (2000) and Appiah (2005) call for a political philosophy of planetary humanism or cosmopolitanism. Here new and existing forms of transglobal identities and movements are recognised as building commonalities that dispel the myth of essential and fixed identities. These may be found in a reconstitution of the body through genetic technology, strong social and health movements such as have been formed around HIV/AIDS, or international labour and environmental movements (Gilroy, 2005:290).

¹¹ Interestingly the activist networks and discourses of human rights formed during the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa provided an efficient and effective base from which to mobilise protest campaigns for the TAC (Friedman and Mottiar, 2005:532).

Looking to transnational movements as drivers for change is a common feature in contemporary theory on race, ethnicity and nationalism. These movements are seen as crossing boundaries and therefore demystifying difference or at the very least reducing their potency as useful political resources (Body-Gendrot, 1998:855). For many theorists these 'identities without borders' are imbued with much hope to transform power relations in the contemporary global society. However, the extent to which they challenge racial categories in South Africa is debatable. Access to technologies and global information that enable these borderless identities are mediated by social standing and wealth. Whilst they may still offer some resistance it is rather optimistic to leave this paradigmatic revolution to these forces alone, especially if the state and popular discourse continue to perform pervasive race thinking. Indeed there is, I feel, a strong argument to be made for state intervention to begin the dismantling of race. Embarking on a social campaign or redesigning social policy to reverse this solidification of race is a step closer to non-racialism. Neville Alexander (2007:101) puts forward a similar argument when he states that:

... without denying the importance of contestation and initiative by subaltern groups, the state – especially the democratic state – has the paradigmatic prerogative, i.e., it sets the template on the basis of which social identities are fashioned.

Gilroy also argues strongly for state responsibility in moving society towards cosmopolitan goals when he advocates that they are not only viable but demanded if we adhere to an 'authentic democracy' (Gilroy, 2000:12). In essence this proposition is built on the reinterpretation of liberalism and universalism, which also opens it to critique. Commentators on Gilroy's approach, such as Robotham (2005:565), warn that moving beyond race will once again, through legal and moral rhetoric, continue to mask the social, economic and political oppression practised by the dominant classes. Robotham is correct to point out the hypocritical history of such liberal concepts, and certainly Gilroy is on shaky ground when he draws on a loosely defined notion of 'authentic democracy'. However, Robotham misses the core of Gilroy's argument and neglects to take his own historical approach to its inevitable conclusion - both past and contemporary politics provides evidence that continuing to fight racism whilst remaining in a racialised paradigm is a dangerous downward spiral. In short it leaves the taxonomy of difference open for future mobilisation, a future wrapped up in discrimination, inequalities and social injustice. Of course state engineering invokes a nervous tension; it is a subjective proposition that can easily swing into odorous territory. It does however present an opportune moment for radical change in a country where the state is actively engaged in nation building (Grest, 2002:38). Certainly I am not advocating here a nation-building project that forges a new meta-identity

as a South African, which in itself may be a problematic activation of crude nationalism (Bouillon, 2002:18); rather an engineering of social spaces for the emergence of cosmopolitan identities. Up until now non-racialism has been used as a kind of window dressing for the state – albeit a rather contradictory one in that it still demands racial demographics, as Goldberg argues (2009:532):

Non-racialism, then, like the emperor's clothes, is what the state wears to represent itself to the world, how it looks. Joseph's technicolor dreamcoat, not the high priest's uniform of any one subgroup or sect. The cloak of national citizenship should be for all to see, for any citizen to take on. At home, in private, one can assume any sectarian uniform, in concert or competition with others, so long as the multi-colored public cover of national unity is respected, indeed embraced, particular identities no matter.

If the state can, as Alexander (2007:101) implies, set “the template on the basis of which social identities are fashioned” then it will have to do more than provide a weak umbrella concept of non-racialism, especially one that often appears in conflict with the multiracial vision of a rainbow nation. What is needed is a political agenda to move into new territory that debunks essentialist thinking about individuals and collectives and crucially reflects on how policies impact on existing cosmopolitan spaces or can create or stifle cosmopolitan dialogues. It is here that research can offer important contributions

The credibility and validity awarded to scientific knowledge, particularly in but not restricted to Western culture, makes it a powerful tool for sustaining social ideologies (Fay, 1996:12; Barnes and Edge, 1982:233), authors such as Saul Dubow (1995 and 2006) offer a detailed analysis of this process in the South African context. Therefore it is possible that it may well be a powerful tool to dismantle them. But scientific knowledge, or more precisely its focus, interpretation and use are always a product of its social context.¹² For example, Darwin's theory of evolution initially provoked a shift in thinking on human origins that took a liberal approach by focusing on our similarities and common ancestors, but later was injected with political undercurrents to quantify a hegemonic system of inequality and difference (Jones, 1980:141). Likewise contemporary genetic findings that indicate immense commonalities between all species, let alone humans, are tools that scientists who discredit or support

¹² See Bourdieu's (1981) insightful article titled *The Specificity of the Scientific Field* for a critique of the internal subject politics of the scientific field, where he argues that those who are recognised as holding scientific authority cannot maintain their position without imposing a definition of science that serves their particular interests and fits their perspective.

notions of race use to validate their arguments (McCann-Mortimer et al, 2004:412). There is also a rift between scientific and popular discourse on race, as seen in the bio-cultural model of race that suggests changes in scientific knowledge may not immediately impact on popular understandings of race.

Besides the multi-layered ideological and structural barriers to entry and exit of scientific knowledge, the real difficulty in challenging the paradigm of race lies in the current conflicting ideologies between science and lived experience (Stepan, 2003:337). Of course this is not surprising given that race and specifically racism is informed by a multitude of different historical ideologies and not science alone. Scientific findings are integrated into popular understandings *if* they serve to verify everyday experiences. Dubow (1995:9) illustrates that just the existence of a, largely inaccessible, body of scientific knowledge during Apartheid was valuable for 'white' South Africans to buy into beliefs about their superiority. Indeed one of the criteria for maintaining ideological beliefs is that they in some way reflect and explain reality, whether the explanation is logical or not is irrelevant (Miles, 1989:80). The discord between new scientific information on similarities, and lived realities of a stratified society, results in the reproduction and reshaping of older discourses of difference. These may take the form of re-interpreting new scientific information to fit back into Apartheid racial categories, or constructing explanatory models of difference based on culture, language and/or nationality rather than new cellular findings. In South Africa, where a solid argument could be made that racialising society before and under Apartheid was an economic project to create a highly rigid class system (Seidman, 1999:423), changes in scientific discourse may have little impact unless coupled with changes in economic structures. Ideologies that support social gain for powerful groups and legitimate existing power relations are often resistant to change (Appiah, 1990:7). Glaring inequalities continue to follow the racialised blueprint of Apartheid (Alexander, 2007:99), and the abundant examples of how race appears to correlate with people's economic standing and social experiences reinforces the race paradigm. For South Africa, grappling to achieve equality and redress with a past built on racial difference, moving beyond race requires a Herculean shift in social belief, practice and structure (Posel et al, 2001:xiii). This suggests that without state commitment to similar goals science alone holds little agency for change.

However, it is not prudent to write off the revolutionary potential of scientific knowledge. Whilst it may not be the Achilles heel in race thinking it most certainly can challenge it in profound ways. Scientific findings offer credibility and validity for social and political policies and projects that attempt to shift essentialist paradigms, providing a resource for addressing the current use of race in the social, economic and political domain. In this sense it offers

useful insights for more self-reflective macro state policies and planning, bringing acknowledgement and awareness of how policies impact on people's ideologies of differences and sameness. One imaginable future is a form of state-supported cosmopolitan thinking where Stuart Hall's (1991:57) assertion "that we are all complexly constructed through different categories, of different antagonisms, and these may have the effect of locating us socially in multiple positions of marginality and subordination, but which do not operate on us in exactly the same way", is a popular and common premise from which to negotiate social interaction. Making a conscious and ethical decision to drive this change requires an in-depth understanding of how people's lived experiences currently make use of various social identities and state apparatuses to both reaffirm and debunk racial identities. Social science research can, and should, offer insights into how and why racial classifications are used in the myriad of informal interactions of everyday life; communicating how micro and macro understandings of race intersect, contest and reinforce one another.

An important starting point in critically analysing race thinking in micro interactions is to consider how these theoretical debates get played out in our own practice: the research process. Work that offers insights into what these debates mean and demand in the process of carrying out research and collecting data are, at present scarce (Howarth, 2009:408). The possibilities for effecting change lie not only in contributing to 'self-reflective macro state policies and planning' as suggested above, but also in contributing to self-reflective social science and research findings, where we can shift consciousness in ourselves and those with whom we interact in our research. Here self-reflection on how we go about our investigations means we can start to challenge essentialist thinking through the micro interactions and dialogues between researcher and respondent, and between writer and reader. It is to these smaller, but as powerful, drivers of change that the article now turns.

The dilemmas of researching race II – in the micro-context of research

Neville Alexander (2007:93), in his critique on the continued use of racial categories in post-apartheid South Africa, states:

We must remember, however, that even though they are constructed, social identities seem to have a primordial validity for most individuals, precisely because they are not aware of the historical, social and political ways in which their identities have been constructed.

If we are to agree with Alexander then research into race can be a consciousness raising exercise, at the very least for the researchers themselves, more optimistically for

respondents and the wider public. Research that incorporates or focuses on how and why race is constructed in specific ways within a research location, rather than takes perceived racial difference between its respondents, and indeed between researcher and respondent, as given, offers the possibilities for loosening these ties that bind, revealing what lies behind the agendas of racialised thought and action. Being more critical of our own research processes forces researchers to tackle the epistemological complexities of how race thinking can shape the research process. The section below does not provide definitive answers to these complexities; rather it hopes to raise some of the dilemmas and questions that arise when integrating critical theoretical thinking on race into the research process. More precisely it tackles some of the issues around how we ask questions, go about selecting our respondents, and the meanings we attach to our own identity in research settings.

How we ask questions

Social scientists interested in methodology have long warned about the necessity to critically reflect on how we ask questions. This awareness needs to extend to thinking about the broader context of social identities within a specific research project. For example, in South Africa the problem of associating questions to race is not that researchers should be colour-blind or afford race no meaning; rather it is that race is *so loaded* with meaning that it may distort people's views and opinions in relation to the research topic.¹³ Steven Friedman and Zimitri Erasmus (2008:65) give one interesting example of this when they analyse how survey respondents' answers differed in relation to redress and transformation when associated with race and class respectively. In this case, 'white' respondents are supportive about redress to uplift poorer sectors of society but not if redress is associated with race. Whilst this finding in itself points to the complex meanings attached to race by some respondents, what it also shows is that if you wish to explore people's feeling about transformation you need to think carefully about how you ask questions. Without testing or critically reflecting on how race may skew responses, findings may not reflect the complexity of a topic. The banality of race in South Africa means that too often race is inserted or implied in questions without much thought to how it influences answers.

This also applies to qualitative methodologies. Direct questions on 'race relations' and racial identities cannot escape the historical and contemporary layers of meaning placed on what it means to be perceived as 'black', 'white', 'indian' and 'coloured' in South Africa, but also, on

¹³South Africa is not the only country in which this may be the case. Studs Terkel (1992) uses the word *obsession* when analysing how Americans think and talk about race.

what it means to talk about race. Respondents, when directly questioned on racial issues, may carefully monitor the research agenda and the researcher's perceptions of their attitudes, and adjust their responses accordingly. With a political climate – that on paper preaches non-racialism, but in practice leans towards multi-racialism – exposing what one thinks about race, as opposed to what one *should* think about race, may be seen as having adverse consequences or carry personal judgement. Narrowing the scope of inquiry to talking directly about racial identities also excludes a better understanding of how multi-identities are interwoven. Using a broader topic on which to base interviews, I believe, generates richer empirical data. It is no longer sufficient to define race thinking and indeed racism as overt social practices or structures. The banality and tenacity of these ideologies require recognition of the embedded way in which race thinking is enacted in society. Providing an open dialogue in which people, if they feel comfortable, can discuss their experiences enables various social identities to emerge as important mechanisms through which people negotiate their social environments. Methodologies that offer these possibilities enable researchers to analyse why race is used in some answers and not others, providing more nuanced understandings of which ideologies and structures enable or shape race thinking. Conceivably, adjusting questions to be more open as suggested here requires a fairly straightforward methodological reshaping, however critically analysing how we select the people of whom we wish to ask these questions is a far more challenging task.

Selecting respondents

In South Africa the temptation to select respondents as representatives of a 'race group' is strong. This is not just because race matters as discussed in the beginning of the article but because this type of thinking is also driven by a desire for social inclusion and justice. With a history of exclusion and discrimination based on race there can be hypersensitivity towards making sure everyone has a voice. Whilst many social scientists would balk at the thought of generalizing, the temptation to 'say something' of import about race is strong. As discussed previously race as a category for research is still supported in various ways, and continues to exist in many funding criteria (Gunaratnam, 2003:45). Presenting data that offers simplified categories can also be seen as useful for policy makers, rather than the more messy interplay of variables experienced in everyday life. And of course it makes for good media headlines, especially in South Africa. As Burawoy (2005:260) points out, academic fields can start to become more about "a battery of disciplinary techniques...and then policing one's colleagues and successors to make sure we all march in step", rather than about critically moving beyond the confines of epistemological comfort. These

occupational pressures of doing research in South Africa mean that what was experienced as a fluid interaction of multiple identities between two or more individuals during the research process may become fixed in ink as representing the way 'race groups' experience the world or each other.

Whilst the desire to 'see' race is more reparative than punitive in some of these cases, it still does not sufficiently reflect on the dilemma of what happens when you leave the layer of theoretical abstraction and move into the more messy process of identifying a respondent. As Carter and Virdee (2008:662) point out, neglecting to offer an explanation for how the researcher has moved "from the claim that 'race' was a popular interpretative category of lay life to the empirical identification of 'racial groups'" serves to re-enforce racial groupings as "naturally occurring". Again the banal performance of racial categorisation is repeated. Here the researcher uses the taught social clues and visual distinctions that Gilroy (2000:42) talks about to select people they think belong to a racial groups – as mentioned at the beginning of this article including check boxes in which to categories respondents' racial identity carries consequences. Researchers need to be more cognisant that using fixed racial categories "tend to create and reinforce the identity of population groups that they were initially only meant to observe" (Christopher, 2002:406). In his article on historically analysing the classification of groups in the South African census Christopher (2002) suggests that shifting the responsibility (or control) of defining the self away from the census researchers and placing it in the hands of the respondents "may accelerate the emergence of new identities". The appeal to open possibilities for future alternatives is an attractive one, if it is pushed beyond simply shifting the responsibility on to the respondent making them check their own racial box. Some researchers may feel that allowing respondents to self-identify washes their hands of the awkward process of classification. It does not: ticking an option on a given list still elicits a repetitive racial performance from the respondent and serves to inform them that whatever they say will be measured against their racial identity. It is the opening up or removal of classification boxes that offers alternate and more in-depth ways of seeing our social world. As acknowledged earlier, in some cases race may be an important concept related to research, but in *all* cases an explanation of why the research required this variable, and an explanation of the epistemology of identification of respondents, should be common practice. It is not acceptable that race is taken as a given that requires little conceptual analysis in social science research. Researchers and scholars need to illustrate a critical awareness of how the abstraction of race interacts with their own practices of engagement.

Some useful tools for finding alternate and less confining ways to identify respondents are found in ethnographic methods. Ethnographic methods provide the necessary flexibility and rich data in which to examine the discord between academic theory and research practice, and official discourses of race and lived experiences. Nayak (2006:427) believes that “[t]his is because it is only by engaging in the complicated clutter of daily life that race can be subverted, crossed over and perhaps eventually crossed out”. Whilst this statement is useful for defending ethnographic methodology, it is also biased. I would argue that many other methods once revisited with a more critical epistemological eye could effectively do the same.¹⁴ However, the process driven nature of ethnography undeniably offers a more dynamic space in which to explore new ways of reflecting on the self, identifying respondents and gathering data.

Here I draw from my own ethnographic research in the city space of Albert Park in Durban. As a way of becoming more familiar with the area and the people who live there I moved into one of the high-rise flats for a nine month period, and afterwards continued to spend time on the street, mostly through sitting on a fold up chair outside a small but popular fruit and vegetable stall. Rather than creating a pre-determined check list of people who I thought I should talk to, certain residents became people of interest through my everyday interactions with them. Living there also made the temptation to connect with a ‘representative’ sample from different racial groups much easier to resist. Having reoccurring interactions with possible respondents meant that people were approached for interviews because, for example, they work on the street and therefore watch its goings-on from Monday to Friday in the daylight hours, or because they act as a form of gatekeeper to resident spaces, or run an infamous tavern down the road – rather than because they are ‘white’, ‘black’, ‘indian’ or ‘coloured’, or indeed male or female. Here, what Essed (2001:504) calls secondary levels of identification, are also acknowledged as important aspects of researching social identities. This is not to say that these respondents do not use racial categories or draw on other more macro social identities of age, gender, occupation and class in their understandings, philosophizing and interactions in this urban space. But ethnographic methods do allow for the more micro identities of shopkeeper, flat supervisor, pensioner and tavern owner to pull through and offer an explanation for certain ways of seeing and acting in the world than focusing primarily through a racial lens. For example,

¹⁴ One example of how this criticality could be integrated into quantitative research is offered by Friedman and Erasmus (2008) in their previously mentioned article *Counting on ‘race’: what the surveys say (and do not say) about ‘race’ and redress*.

many residents spoke of a difference between people who 'belonged' in Albert Park (generally residents who are seen as good and honest) and outsiders who visit the area to drink in taverns and do crime. Likewise identities that were seen as being in conflict were that of being a foreigner as opposed to a South African. Both these differentials were related to feelings of personal safety in the area. For some of the residents, race was interrelated with notions of insiders and outsiders, but often other social identities were used to supersede race in favour of more localised common interests. For example long term residents have an unwritten rule of looking out for each other (this can literally mean watching the streets from your flat window), particularly in terms of each other's safety and health.

Opening up the research to the possibilities of evolving identities in heterogeneous spaces, whilst remaining alert to how race plays into these – although never presupposing the meaning attached to race – offers a far more nuanced understanding of how people both draw on and disrupt identities in multiple strategies of sense making and survival. This approach is particularly beneficial for research located in urban areas where social identities interact on a myriad of levels, and reformulate, dissipate or materialize in response to each other (Beall, 1997:3). It also enables insight into how, in this case, municipal structures impact on these identities. In 2009 the Metro Police renovated an old building in Albert Park for their new offices.¹⁵ This particular improvement of policing services through increased foot patrols and visible arrests has started to change the way some of the residents think about their neighbourhood - that it is safer than before - but also interestingly about their neighbours. One flat supervisor commenting on seeing the police make arrests told me during an interview:

Like before we used to say no it's the foreigners [who] take the bags because now we think they were the only people to do wrong things and we were wrong, we were definitely wrong because everybody does stupid things sometimes.¹⁶

This suggests that state or municipal led delivery that meets people's needs in an area, whilst offering a desired municipal service, may also start to shape more positive social relations.

¹⁵*Durban Central moves to Albert Park – Metro Police aim to increase their presence in area.* 2009, May 16. *Independent on Saturday*, pp 5.

¹⁶ Interview in respondents flat in Albert Park 11th May 2010 (10am – 11am)

Thinking about the self

Ethnography also provides a space for self-reflection on the awareness of the researcher's social identity on respondents' interactions and responses. Rhodes (cited in Nayak, 2006:425) offers inspiration when stating that whilst still important to take into consideration, "the significance of skin colour was rarely the same from start to finish of an interview and more was gained from considering it as an interactive factor in the dynamic context of each interview than from attempting to isolate it as a variable". This understanding forces the researcher to move beyond the dilemma of reifying 'racial' classifications. In this sense social identity is viewed as part of an ethnographic process rather than a given that exists exogenous to the interaction between researcher and respondent (Nayak, 2006:426). This is not to say that whilst living in Albert Park my being perceived as 'white' had no relevance; in some ways and spaces I felt it did; but as Vron Ware (cited in Nayak, 2006:418) eloquently puts it, if there is something worth analysing here "[i]t is not about *being* a white women, it is about *being thought of* as a white woman".

One example that illustrates both the benefit and difficulty of shifting the analytical focus towards Ware's statement when race appears to offer part of the analytical process is a morning I spent with Priscilla, one of the respondent's from Albert Park. Priscilla and I had had numerous informal conversations on the street but at the end of a more formal interview session in her flat she asked me to give her a lift to the sheriff's office to collect a deposit she had put down on an unsuccessful bid on a flat for auction. The sheriff's office had held her money for over a year and the clerk dealing with her deposit constantly avoided her phone calls or was on leave, in short preventing Priscilla from earning interest on her money. When we arrived at the sheriff's office she indicated that she would like me to come inside with her, and gestured for me to follow her to the counter. I felt a little silly standing next to her at the counter whilst she negotiated for a cheque. At first he suggested that they would do an electronic transfer into her bank account, but she refused to leave without a cheque and when he responded that that would take time she purposefully asked me in front of him if we would be able to wait, to which I agreed that we would. She obviously caught the clerk by surprise at arriving unannounced and at the end of the 20 minutes she left with her money. On the drive back she was really happy and appreciative that I had taken her there and back; she told me that because I had helped her she would in turn help me if I needed anything. In Albert Park reciprocity is synonymous with trust and from then on Priscilla and I have a far more open relationship. During the drive she also told me they must have thought

“who is this women here with her” talking about me. I joked and said that I could be her lawyer. Immediately she smiled and agreed: “you see maybe that is what they thought”. The tone of her voice suggested that this is exactly what she had banked on.

But what was it about my presence that Priscilla thought would lend weight to her cause? What did she anticipate the clerk would read into my being there? I am at least two generations younger than her; usually a younger person would not be seen to hold any authority over the more experienced older person, so why did Priscilla, and myself through my unconscious jest, think that I may be perceived as legal counsel? One possible interpretation is that Priscilla assumed that the clerk would make racialised assumptions. In South Africa I would be labelled ‘white’, and she may have played on the fact that the clerk would assume that a relationship between her and I, especially considering the age gap, would be a professional rather than personal one. Here ‘whiteness’ intersects with class as it is associated with historical advantage through having better access to education and professional careers. Of course that she perceives me as ‘white’ only holds currency because I am contrasted against her own racial classification. In other words if race enters the analysis it is because in South Africa we are labelled, and can label each other, as different. Using race as an explanatory tool in analysing this situation means that I too would have to recognise that Priscilla is labelled differently to me. Growing up in South Africa means that I am acutely aware of the visual cues and social indicators that are used to classify people. I presume that Priscilla is *classified* (rather than *is*) ‘black’, my presumption lies in assessing her skin tone, which is darker than mine, in listening to her speak (she is fluent in isiZulu and English) and because she told me that she grew up in a township outside of Durban. Here I perform the classification rituals of Apartheid. I look at her body, I listen to her language and I assess her upbringing and then place her in a category that is meant to represent her. She of course has done the same with me. That as people living in South Africa we can do this is testimony to the prevalence of race thinking.

On first reading the above practice of classification in my own work may appear awkward and contradictory considering the theoretical analysis above. Yet it is important to include for a number of reasons; firstly, it highlights the difficulty of researching race without performing it yourself, a difficulty researchers need to grapple with rather than ignore. Secondly, rather than a researcher simply assigning a racial category to a respondent a transparent description of how the researcher identifies people, elucidates how people use various strategies through which to construct race, which in turn can be problematized. This

also demands contemplation on how the researcher is part of the production of race instead of merely providing a description of it. Lastly, what it asks is that the researcher analyse why at this particular moment their own, or another's, classification becomes important. It also demonstrates how one's own perceived race can be appropriated by another person and used as a strategic means to an end. The above example suggests that people are able to abstract racial stereotypes from an individual and utilise them for very specific livelihood strategies, whilst simultaneously discarding it during other micro-level interactions. That race becomes part of the analytical process within an institutional context is of vital importance. It is in making an official query in a formal state building where 'whiteness' in South Africa may be seen to accrue status and privilege. Priscilla's success in retrieving her money where she had been unsuccessful in the past would reconfirm the lived reality of institutional racism. It is in investigating these points of interaction with state structures that social science may offer possibilities for more inclusive state projects. This offers far more insight into how race is constructed through dialogue with other individuals and institutions, rather than placing emphasis on *being* 'white' or 'black' (in my opinion an impossible state to occupy).

Conclusion

The above examples raise more questions and demands deeper reflection rather than offer any definitive solution about the complexities of doing research on race and race thinking in society. Neither do they offer an alternative to the use of racial categories in research; instead they aim to emphasise where the analytical focus of research on race should lie – on the complexities, awkwardness and ethical dilemmas of researching in this field. Analysis of this kind requires engagement in how the broader theoretical discussions in the field of race and race thinking shape the research process and how it in turn reshapes our theoretical understandings of this social construct. More importantly examining both the macro and micro contexts that inform research enables us to start reflecting critically on the role of research in opposing/challenging and constructing possible futures. This in turn presents possibilities to address and dismantle frameworks, both tangible and intangible, that support race thinking and its inevitable relative racism. Of course this article asks for more than that. It argues that we should take seriously the responsibility of social science in constructing future possibilities for thinking about race, and indeed considers the possibilities and value of its erasure; although it is less interested in jumping directly to a post-race agenda or finding another definitive alternative classification device. Instead it calls for debate and action on beginning the process of moving away from essentialised racial categories – in research and

policy. It is in the process of *moving* – a process that demands critical reflections and asks hard questions – that we may begin the important journey towards more inclusive, heterogeneous and open spaces in South Africa.

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