Researching Race and Racism in Education During a ‘Whitelash’

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Despite determined claims to the contrary, both Brexit and the election of Donald Trump are about race. Whilst each respective campaign was couched in a superficially palatable and colourblind (but deeply racially coded) commitment to ‘taking back’ control for their respective citizens¹, both claimed the mantle of patriotism and promised a political hardline on restrictive immigration.

Today, on both sides of the Atlantic, political histories are being written, not despite racism, but because of it – a so-called ‘Whitelash’ (Ryan, 2016) against a perceived loss of power and privilege in an increasingly diverse society. As suggested by Toni Morrison: “So scary are the consequences of a collapse of white privilege that many... have flocked to a political platform that supports and translates violence against the defenseless as strength” (Morrison, 2016). Notions of Brexit and Trump’s vision of America are both (fundamentally if not explicitly) about protecting a racial order in which Whiteness reigns supreme. If we are truly serious about ‘taking control’ or making a nation ‘great again’, we must ensure that every child can go to school free from fear, and that opportunities are equally available to all.

The marked increase in racist and xenophobic attacks following both votes² drives home the desperate need for continued research in our education systems. However, until the rhetoric of shock and outrage to the recent events move us to action, there is a danger that even well meaning ‘liberal’ critics will become complicit in the processes that they outwardly deplore. Outrage without action could merely absolve us from responsibility and worsen the situation. The need for action is especially urgent for those White people who do not consider themselves racist; Whiteness may simply become recast as witness to racism, but without any action to dismantle the enduring system of White supremacy. Merely being reflexive about the way in which one is complicit in the oppression of others does not make this oppression excusable or acceptable (Ahmed, 2004). In times of extremes, there is a responsibility to go further. If the scholar-activist Derrick Bell taught the academy anything, it is that one person’s actions can and do make a difference. It may not be enough to notice or write about race and racism in education; sometimes we are called to ‘confront authority’ (Bell, 1994).

As scholars in an academy dominated by White persons (87%³), there is an urgent need to critically consider how White academics, researchers and educators, specifically, can contribute to the disruption of White supremacy. White scholars are all too often driven to inaction for fear of: ‘overstepping’ boundaries; ‘offending’ or patronising colleagues or participants of colour (Bergerson, 2003); or are themselves unwilling to acknowledge the existence of Whiteness as a political project to defend and enforce the racialised social order.

Critical race theory (CRT) is a radical perspective that seeks to expose the racialised character of society and, in particular, to document and interrupt the taken-for-granted assumptions that reinforce the racist status quo. Such a perspective requires constant critical reflection and poses particular challenges for White researchers. As a White, female, critical race theorist, I urge all scholars to tirelessly question the dominant-culture process of conducting research with minoritised people, keeping a firm view on their own potential to reinforce injustice, further marginalise minority communities, and perpetuate White hegemony.

¹ “Vote Leave, Take Control” (Vote Leave campaign slogan) and “Make America Great Again” (Trump campaign slogan). ² ‘Race and religious hate crimes rose 41% after EU vote’ suggest recent Home Office figures, see http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-37640983 and ‘The Southern Poverty Law Center counted 867 cases of hateful harassment or intimidation in the United States in the 30 days after the November 8 election,’ see http://edition.cnn.com/2016/11/10/us/post-election-hate-crimes-and-fears-trnd.
Whilst several scholars have explored the effects of White researchers (as ‘cultural outsiders’) researching minority ethnic persons’ experiences and narratives (as ‘cultural insiders’) (Laimputtong, 2010), ultimately, although it may seem a ‘safe’, ‘familiar’ and/or ‘culturally centred’ approach for participants, the notion of restricting research in race and racism in education to ‘cultural insiders’ is not only practically irrational but also politically and ontologically unreasonable. For example, in the UK there are only 57 Black male professors and 17 Black female professors (Bhopal, 2016) (out of a total 14,315 professors; around 0.5% of all professors), and yet, 5.5%4 of students in UK state-funded primary and secondary schools are classified as ‘Black’, or 11%5 if you include those of White-Black African/Caribbean backgrounds.

Whilst acknowledging the criticisms of not being ‘matched’ to many of the participants in my own research (race/nationality/gender) (Mizock et al, 2012), it would be misconceived to conclude that differences of skin alone impacted upon the ‘truthfulness’ of the participants’ responses (Phoenix, 1994). In my own experiences, although the participants – both Black and White – never mistook me for ‘one of their own,’ the participants did create a space for me. With time spent together, experiencing lived realities alongside them as a living and reacting human being, the participants permitted me their truths, as they perceived them to be – each unique.

I thus challenge any simplistic assumption that a single dimension of identity (even one as pivotal as race) is a barrier to ‘cross-cultural’ research in education, on the grounds that ‘matching’ researcher and participant: 1) ignores the dynamic interaction of social difference, 2) proposes mono-culturality, in which members are homogenised along racial and ethnic lines, and 3) treats racial identity as separate to other identities, to include gender, age, sexuality, socioeconomic status, and individual norms, mores, values and beliefs.

What is most vital to critical education research on race and racism is that White researchers do not ignore the presence of difference between interviewer and participant; doing so is a privileged viewpoint that has great potential to perpetuate White hegemony and further marginalise minority ethnic groups (Bergerson, 2003). Additionally, by not acknowledging one’s own racial positioning, a White researcher can fail to recognise the ways in which structures of White supremacy impact on the whole research process, and therefore contribute to reinforcing the racial order.

Critical Race Theory offers an opportunity to expose Whiteness as an unspoken yet pervasive ideology, and acknowledge how Whiteness and White privilege are institutionalised in the process of schooling. For a critical race theorist, central-g Guiding questions may include: Whose interests are being served through this research? How and when are racialised dynamics produced and negotiated within the interview process? How are participants’ narratives given meaning in the analysis? How am I centring the voices of my participants in the presentation of the data (and not re-centring my own voice: a White voice) (Chadderton, 2012)?

Collectively, the academy has a powerful capacity to challenge the ‘White gaze’ of traditional ethnographic research, and in the spirit of Derrick Bell, confront the ‘Whitewash’ we are witnessing in political arenas, and in society more broadly, on both sides of the Atlantic.

REFERENCES


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