

Racialized Discourses: Writing Against an Essentialized Story About Racism

Harjeet Badwall
York University

Abstract

This paper is concerned with the ethics of knowledge production when conducting research on racial injustice. The discussion draws upon my doctoral research, in which I interviewed 23 racialized social workers in Toronto, Canada, about their encounters with racism in the workplace. The discussion centres on my role as a racialized researcher and the effects of any assumed “insider-ness” on how I heard and interpreted participant narratives. Although the workers and I shared experiences of racism, I could not assume “sameness,” nor could I adopt an authentic voice about how racism is experienced. This paper examines the significance of producing research about racial domination, but argues for an anti-essentialist stance. I explore the ethical dilemmas involved through examining the dominant assumptions underlying insider research.

Keywords: race, racism, discourse analysis, research

Only when we come to be very clear about how race is lived, in its multiple manifestations, only when we come to appreciate its often hidden epistemic effects and its power over collective imaginations of public space, can we entertain even the remote possibility of its eventual transformations.

(Alcoff, 2002, p. 267)

This paper is concerned with the ethics of knowledge production when conducting research on racial injustice. I specifically examine the ethical dilemmas that arise from the assumptions that constitute insider/outsider debates in research, and I make the argument that the danger for essentialism poses significant risks to research. The discussion draws upon my doctoral research, in which I interviewed 23 racialized social workers in Toronto, Canada, about their encounters with racism in the workplace. The study focused on the ways in which racialized workers negotiate professional practice within a white-normed profession, with a specific emphasis the ways in which racial injustice manifests in everyday social work. The stories shared by participants in this study were emotionally heavy, complicated, hard to tell (and hear). The workers shared narratives describing how clients would refuse to work with them, utter racist comments toward them, and in some situations, used physical violence (Badwall, 2014). Furthermore, they relayed how co-workers and managers responded to these acts, which more often than not resulted in no action or support. Instead, their stories reveal the ways in which social work values of helping,

empathy, and client-centred practice silence the operation of white dominance and collude with micro-aggressions of racism.¹ It was important to me to share these stories in a manner that exposed practices and structures of white dominance in social work while at the same time was demonstrative of the complex and multiple relations of power.

I am a woman of colour, and at the time of the study I was also a practising social worker who had experienced many of the encounters that were shared by the participants. I entered into the research with an understanding that I could not escape my own relationships to whiteness, racism, and social work. My multiple subject-positions were in the room and did not live outside of the interviews with the social workers. Instead, our subject-positions and complicated histories of racism were dependent upon each other in documenting the narratives about whiteness and racism and social work. Although the workers and I shared experiences of racism, I could not assume “sameness,” nor could I adopt an authentic voice about how “we” (racialized social workers) negotiate the violent terrain of everyday racism. Foundational, shared experiences can be shaped by intimate connections to communities of belonging across ethnicity, race, culture, and common experiences of marginalization (Chavez, 2008; Dywer & Buckle, 2009; Fisher, 2015). However, Scott (1992) cautioned that identity (and experience) are contested terrains in which multiple and conflicting ideas will operate. It was critical to pay attention the similarities, but also the differences, between me and the participants (and across the participants).

In this paper, I argue that the assumptions shaping insider research are at risk of effacing the differences between researchers and participants. Ignoring the multiplicity of discourses shaping marginalization and resistance can result in ethical dilemmas that silence key contributions made by participants, including the influences of social, historical contexts. Therefore, my aim in this research was to present a complex analysis of racial domination. This meant that I wrote against a single story about racism or an essentialized representation about how race is experienced by people of colour. Furthermore, I had to be vigilant about the ways in which my assumptions were at risk of eroding the complexity of participant stories. The challenge was to pay attention to complexity while, at the same time, not to diminish a larger narrative about racial injustice. I begin the paper with a background on the study and briefly discuss my theoretical frameworks for the research. Second, I explore the significance of race research to address issues of power and materiality. Third, I present literature on insider–outsider debates in research that aim to complicate and disrupt the binary between insiders and outsiders. Finally, I examine the importance of intersubjectivity and reflexivity when conducting insider research. My hope is to contribute to a larger discussion about the research ethics involved when we focus our work on sites of marginalization, with an aim to complicate our assumptions about insider research.

¹ Please see Badwall (2014) for a more detailed description of the research at <http://journals.library.mun.ca/ojs/index.php/IJ/article/view/996>

Background of Research

My research examined how workers' narratives about racism rupture hegemonic practices of whiteness that run in and through social work knowledge production about its values and practices. Their accounts serve as counter-narratives that challenge the ways in which social work education has centralized whiteness within knowledge production about the profession's ideals and practices. Social workers participated in semi-structured, qualitative interviews that explored social work values, practices, and their experiences with racism in the field. Of particular concern were their encounters with racial violence in everyday practice moments with clients, and the lack of support from co-workers and managers in the institutions. I was purposefully tracing the ways in which racism was made invisible in organizations through various discourses and practices of whiteness. In addition, I wanted to know how institutional whiteness remained centred in the exact moments that racial violence was dismissed. To do this, I had to understand how white dominance in social work was historically established through "helping discourses" (Heron, 1999; Valverde, 1991) and look for the ways in which the desire to be "good" and "moral" remain intact in contemporary social work education and practice. Therefore, my research explored how social work values and practices are historically produced through colonial constructions of whiteness that define *who* the social worker is, but also, *how* they are to perform (Jeffery, 2002). The project revealed a troubling paradox: Social work values committed to social justice ideals are at risk of colluding with every day practices of racism (Badwall, 2014). In the contemporary, colonial continuities remain intact through our desires to be "client-centred," empathic, and critically reflexive (Badwall, 2014). My research illustrates how racialized social workers cannot be seen as good workers, because in the face of racial violence, they cannot maintain the profession's imperatives to be client-centred and empathic. The participants' narratives reveal stories of overarching dominance, in addition to the specificity of how racism takes place in every day practice.

Writing Against the Single Story: Race, Power, and Materiality

Stories about racism are discursively codified to allow certain narratives about racism to be told and not others (Razack, 2004). Razack argued that deconstructing narratives requires "separating the experiences of individuals from the way their stories are assembled for our consumption" (p. 18). In other words, what do certain stories "do"? What are the taken-for-granted assumptions that underlie truth claims in our stories? These questions invite an analysis that moves away from naturalizing certain claims, and instead pay close attention to how discourses are assembled and organized through complex practices of power. Linking Razack's argument back to my research, I looked closely at the signifiers within the narratives that produced certain understandings about the dominant values and practices of the profession. Some of these signifiers included words such as *helping*, *social justice*, *empathy*, *care*, and so forth. However, I also understand Razack to be arguing that the signifiers are never outside of power and practices of domination. Therefore, discourses of helping, care, and empathy signify particular forms of authority in

social work through white femininity, and I examined their moralizing and regulatory effects on the professional practices of racialized workers.

Similarly, Carter (2000) argued that we need to move beyond an analysis that examines the construction of differences, to include the ways in which very specific discourses are “contested, reproduced or resignified” (p. 49) by certain subjects. He contended that we must examine *who* is actually doing the contesting or resignifying. The operation of discourses cannot solely examine the role of language in the production of social reality, but the analysis must also examine how discourses inform the material conditions that shape social reality (Hook, 2001). Carter (2000) contended that we must pay attention to the ways in which discourses produce particular material conditions that socially mark bodies:

How we present ourselves physically, and how our physical, corporeal self is interpreted by others, is, to a greater or lesser extent, a product of the ways in which our subjectivities are determined by various moral technologies. (Carter, 2000, p. 29)

The analysis of racism and the operation of whiteness cannot be divorced from the ways in which societal norms are produced through visual markers of difference (Alcoff, 2002). In this sense, subject-positions are personified through a set of power relations that are predicated upon notions of civility and degeneracy (Goldberg, 1993), in which the body is made by power (Butler, 2005). When white clients refused to work with racialized workers, I avoided an analysis that viewed these events as unusual or infrequent or the actions of a few bad apples. Instead, I situated these events within moralizing scripts of civility, where people of colour do not signify the normalized identity of the social worker in their professional settings. The work of race scholars assisted me with questions of method and analysis to shape a non-essentializing engagement with the data while, at the same time, to write a complex story about racism. However, the practice of conducting the research invited dilemmas that I did not expect. Most of the time, these dilemmas were shaped by my investments in telling a particular tale about racism, and I realized that I could not escape my own assumptions about “insider-ness.”

Insider–Outsider Research: Cautionary Notes

The social workers interviewed identified feelings of urgency and relief in talking about the racism they were experiencing. For some, the interview was the first time they were disclosing stories about the racist environments in which they were employed. During the interviews, I recall the moments in which I felt connected to participants, when there was an assumption of shared experience. In other moments, disconnection would appear when a participant was describing an understanding of racism that was outside of my particular frames of reference. It was not until I began reading the transcripts that I became aware of the specific moments in which my own reactions may have shaped the unfolding of the storylines within the research. I was also a counsellor at the time of the interviews and was conscious about my practices as a researcher slipping into a counselling response, and I wondered if the participants also expected this of me. The stories being shared were emotionally dense, and although I did not enter into a formal “counselling” role, I

was aware that my roles as researcher, counsellor, and racialized social worker were blurred and overlapping. Looking back, I question how my (and the participants') assumptions about insider-ness influenced the stories about social work and racism. I also question how these assumptions both aided and potentially limited the research that was developed.

Frankenberg (2004) argued that all research is situated and researchers require a reflexive engagement about how they are positioned within the study. She stated that the position of the researcher must be accounted for, as there is no objectivity "or an all-seeing glance" (p. 106). My own position as a social worker (at the time of the study) and as a woman of colour needed attention within the research. The analysis of the data evoked questions about the ways in which my multiple subject-positions (race, gender, class, sexuality, age, education, and language) were influencing the conversations with participants and the interpretation of the data (Fine, 1994; Foster, 1994; Frankenberg, 2004). Ethical considerations were present with regard to how my assumptions about racism could affect how I interpreted the workers stories, represented them, and "heard" their voice(s).

Considerable literature has been written about the insider–outsider debates in research (Chavez, 2008; Fine & Vanderslice, 1992; Greene, 2014). Insider research has been simply defined as the study of one's own social group or society (Naples, 2003, as cited in Greene, 2014). Many assumptions circulate in the literature about the ease with which "insiders" may conduct research with their communities. These assumptions include ideas about possessing pre-existing knowledge, understanding the emotional and psychological precepts of participants, creating more nuanced insights, and assumptions about safety and trust (Chavez, 2008; Fisher, 2015; Greene, 2014). Some have also argued that insider research aims to "support political action to highlight injustice and inequity" (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; Nayak, 2006, and Price, 2010, as cited in Fisher, 2015). I must state from the onset that I value many of the reasons why insider research is conducted. However, my support for this approach does not arise out of a belief in essentialized notions of communities or experience, nor is my support straightforward.

The usefulness of this approach is connected to the importance of marginalized communities conducting research that challenges domination as a political project. Shared experiences between researchers and participants may strengthen political action that supports resistance practices and movements against domination. When writing against domination and injustice, narratives of shared experiences can serve to trace the historical and present-day constitution of violence, in addition to practices of resistance. In this study, the workers were negotiating racism across their cultural, social, and political histories, as well as well as negotiating social work sites of practice. All of these factors (and others) contributed to the specificities surrounding the ways in which multiple forms of racism infiltrated their work lives. Furthermore, there exists an embodied experience of racialization (Alcoff, 2002). Although individual subjects have varied meanings about racialization and its negotiation, embodiment is critical to insider research, largely due to the fact that our world continues to be assessed through colour-lines (Alcoff, 2002). Consequently,

very real material effects can take place for racialized people (Carter, 2000; Hook, 2001). For example, worker responses to racial violence were influenced by long and complicated histories of racism in their lives. Therefore, racial violence, both inside and outside of social work, shaped the particular meanings that workers attached to these encounters. It was important to illuminate these factors and not dilute their influence. For these reasons, there is great value in exploring shared experiences among equity-seeking groups. Participant narratives brought into focus forms of racial violence in social work that had not been previously acknowledged, in particular, racism from client populations in social work practice (Badwall, 2014). The insights from the research raise serious questions about social work education and its collusion in everyday racism. Therefore, insider research has the potential to bring into awareness various forms of domination that contribute to larger narratives of systemic violence and marginalization.

However, we cannot assume that insider-ness is a straightforward or stable process. Problematic assumptions may circulate within these discourses about who is an insider versus an outsider; and oftentimes, essentialism is espoused (Bettez, 2014). In an attempt to complicate insider–outsider relations, I turn to the work of scholars who theorize these relations across a complex continuum of identity-making processes (Bettez, 2014; Greene, 2014). Below I illustrate the ways in which insider research can be useful toward political projects, while at the same time, highlight some cautions.

Complicating the Binary

One of the grand ideas promoting insider research is one of sameness between researcher and participants (Chavez, 2008). There are assumptions about shared characteristics among insider group members, or homogenous understandings about how racism is defined, lived, and resisted. These assumptions can lead to other dangers, such as essentializing the operation of racism and the subjects who experience its effects. Essentialist understandings of race and racism fail to examine the ways in which race is socially produced or the fluidity of racial meanings within communities (Alcoff, 1991, p. 182). Although my theoretical entry points into the research were grounded in post-structuralism, I was not immune to the seductive promises of insider-ness in research. I was at risk for taking for granted the notion that participants shared a global meaning or understanding of racism. Furthermore, I could not rest comfortably into an assumption that our shared subject-positions (as raced, gendered, social workers) guaranteed comfort and safety for the participants. There may have been moments of comfort and shared understanding, but they were not stable or consistent.

The workers interviewed for this study embodied a diversity of subject-positions across gender, class, sexuality, immigration status, and age. Each of these differences needed attention within the data in order to examine how race was interlocked with gender, class, sexuality, and so forth. Furthermore, their narratives were also influenced by the social and historical context of their own lives. The participants, depending on their ethno-cultural subject-positions, experienced racism differently within their lives. I needed to give attention to how Black racism differed from South Asian racism, etc. These histories were very much a part of the meaning making that participants shared about their encounters with racism in the field of

social work practice. For example, social workers who identified as new immigrants had a different set of challenges with regard to racial oppression than workers who were born in Canada or had lived here for many years. They described situations in which their competency was continually questioned due to the presence of an “accent” when they spoke. In one situation, a male immigrant social worker was eventually fired from his job due to minor mistakes in his case notes, and he was told that he did not have enough Canadian experience. Moreover, there were key differences across the institutional practice settings in which they were employed. For example, how racism was expressed in smaller grassroots organizations was different from the ways in which it was exercised in hospitals or school boards where larger bureaucracy and professionalism influenced its expression. Therefore, the institutional context was strongly present within their narratives about what constitutes good, competent professional practice. In these respects, participants’ narratives were not singular accounts of racism (Britzman, 2003), but as Henderson (1991) stated, they were constituted through a “simultaneity of discourses” in which their speech and practices included the discursive arrangements of many other voices, ideas, and values.

Bettez (2014), drawing on the work of Puar (2007), used the term *assemblage* to denote a collection of subject-positions that shape partial and unfinished positionalities (p. 4–5). Bettez (2014) argued that researchers need to critically reflect on the various assemblages that constitute identity making so that we may pay attention to the *assemblages of difference* between researchers and participants. Bettez asserted that a reflexive engagement with our multiple subject-positions can minimize “potential tendencies to essentialize others and ourselves and maximize our awareness of multiplicities of difference, particularly as they relate to structures of oppression” (p. 5).

My assumed insider-ness revolved around shared experiences of being racialized and a social worker. For example, I entered into the research assuming that as social workers, we spoke a similar “social work language”—this was untrue. There were great variances across our understanding of social work, which was shaped by factors such as when we had graduated from our social work programs. For example, participants who had graduated nearly thirty years ago drew on ideas that are quite different from the dominant anti-oppressive, critical discourses of more recent graduates. The differences between me and the participants were greatly influenced by gender, religion, class, immigration status, etc. It would have been unethical for me to ignore these sites of difference because to do so would mean I ignored significant sites of influence in participant stories about racism. On reflection, these concerns were also true about my own shifting positionalities (Greene, 2014) as researcher, woman, racialized, social worker, etc. It would have been equally unethical to ignore how my shifting subject-positions influenced my engagement with participants. I had to reflect on the moments when I was deeply affected by stories of racism, or when my responses were shaped by my social worker identity, or that of a researcher, etc. Therefore, insider-ness is not a fixed or a static state of being (Chavez, 2008; Trowler, 2011), and our shifting subjectivities

are never complete, but partial and in an ongoing state of “becoming” (Bettez, 2014). I agree with Chavez (2008), who argued that we are partial insiders and partial outsiders, as our subjectivities are fluid and ever-changing. The unevenness of our subjectivities points to the effects of multiple and multi-directional relations of power, and hence, to the significance of engaging in ethical relations with participants. The ethical considerations for writing against a single, essentialized story about racism serve to examine how race is also interlocked with gender, sexuality, class, etc., and these facets are integral to the ways in which race, racism, and racialization are constituted across various contexts.

Dwyer and Buckle (2009) proposed the notion of the “third space” between the insider–outsider binary. They advocated for “a dialectical approach that may explore the complexity of similarities and differences” between researchers and participants (p. 60). The third space, according to the authors, is a site in which “paradox, ambiguity, and ambivalence” can take place (p. 60) and be engaged as a part of the research process. Their focus both on similarities and on differences is important to the discussion. The commitment to complicating and disrupting the assumptions underlying insider–outsider debates must not run the risks of diffusing similarities or shared experiences between researchers and participants. In addition, examining the third space also allows for the exploration of difference or points of disconnection. For example, my own biases with regard to cultural competency models became apparent when interviewing a participant who was very invested in these approaches. For him, the antidote to institutional racism was education on culture.

Holloway and Jefferson (2000) argued that narratives are a site of “intersubjectivity” (p. 44) in which the production of storylines is a mutually constitutive process. It was expected that certain biases and shared experiences of racism would shape the exchanges between me and the participants and the interpretations of the research, regardless of “our knowledge or ignorance, insider-ship or outsider-ship, centrality or marginality, passion or disregard” (Fine & Vanderslice 1992, p. 202). Young (2004), drawing on Reinhartz (1991), suggested that our multiple selves (i.e., race, gender, class, sexuality, age) as researchers can influence the dynamics of research at any given time, whereby “respondents and informants may react to any of these in ways that foster, hinder, or dramatically affect the research” (p. 191). Therefore, the researcher and participants are in a mutually constitutive relationship—in which the researcher is also a co-participant (Chavez, 2008, p. 476).

Writing Myself into the Research

I engaged the research interviews as narratives and storylines. Davies (2000) stated that the discursive production of subject-positions is formed through jointly produced storylines that are “organized conversations and around various poles such as events, characters, and moral dilemmas” (p. 93). The idea that researchers are also co-participants is an important alternative to positivist research that assumes researchers are objective and stable. In efforts to support inter-subjectivity, I made the decision to be interviewed for the research, and my narrative is included among the stories presented. Although accounts from my narrative are minimally dispersed throughout

the thesis, the decision to include my storyline was motivated by an understanding that my subject-position(s) were influencing the interpretation of the data.

The decision to include my storyline was also motivated by a commitment to remain critically reflexive during the research process and carefully engage the various ways in which my insider–outsider status informed the theoretical entry points and the interpretation of the interviews. The role of the researcher can re-inscribe relations of dominance, and there is no innocent knowledge on the part of the researcher. Therefore, I emphasized my own multi-vocality and sought to avoid reinscribing an authentic voice for all people of colour. In this sense, not only was I speaking with and to the narratives provided by the participants, I was speaking with my own multiple narratives as well. However, I was not speaking as an objective outsider looking in, nor as a “knowing insider,” but instead as a multifaceted subject whose stories and analysis were informed by a number of socially and historically produced discourses. Therefore, during the process of facilitating the interviews, I kept a journal of the particular reactions and assumptions that I was experiencing following each interview. The reflective journal highlighted to me the production of various reactions I was experiencing, especially to the stories of racialized violence or assumptions about identity making. However, the journal also supported me to examine the messy examples when my values or understanding of the material differed from the participants. Hamden (2009), drawing on Pillow (2003), argued that reflexivity as a practice should push researchers toward sites of unfamiliarity and discomfort (p. 381). The goals of reflection should not support self-indulgence or transcendence: Hamden (2009), drawing on Pillow (2003), argued that reflexivity as a practice should push researchers toward sites of unfamiliarity and discomfort (p. 381) and issued a call for “a positioning of reflexivity not as clarity, honesty, or humility, but as practice of confounding disruptions” (Pillow, 2003, as cited in Hamden, 2009, p. 381).

While there are common themes present among the interviews about racism, adding my own narrative challenged me to purposely look for sites of tension and differentiation about how racism is experienced and its particular operations. It was ethically important to avoid marking my encounters with racism as the definitive signs of how race is experienced. Although my narrative functioned as a reflexive tool in the interpretation process, it did not fully resolve power imbalances (Heron, 1999). The power afforded to me as a researcher was maintained insofar as I determined the selection of the accounts, as my interpretation (however complex) shaped how participant narratives were shared. The overall presentation of the study was determined by my role as a researcher, in which I had “the power to reinterpret and hence authorize the experiences and voices of others in ways that may clash or not resonate with the lived experiences they seek to explore” (Britzman, 2003, p. 38). This is a privilege that was unavailable to the participants of this study; and, therefore, there was no site of innocence that could rescue me from the ways in which my subject-positions as a researcher, social worker, and racialized woman operated throughout the formation of the research. Although gaps will exist, and while I did not produce stable and fixed understandings of racism, I still argue that

the decision to include my own narrative was important to the process and to fostering a reflexive relationship to the difficult content of the research.

Conclusion

Recognizing a multiplicity of voices, truths, and subject-positions means we cannot examine the operation of racialized discourses in ways that fix their expression or denote authenticity. In this paper, I have explored the assumptions underlying insider–outsider research projects. I have explored what is useful about insider research, along with the ethical risks of homogenizing the experiences of insider groups in our work. The focus of this paper has not been to establish a position strongly for or against these approaches, but instead to highlight some cautionary notes. I suggest that there is no stable or innocent place to stand when we are creating research, and inevitable risks are involved. Our commitments to ethical practices dictate that we seek out and co-create methods that reduce the harm involved. This paper is a reflective account of how I negotiated these concerns during the research.

The movement away from fixed truths about oppression can invite worries about how to make particular truth claims. In some respects, my worry about how to speak to dominance was alleviated by Valverde’s (2004) reassurance that we do not have to abandon truth telling in our efforts to examine the production of discursive subject-formation, but we “can consider the possibility that there are many different practices of truth telling and, therefore, many different kinds of selves, and that these can easily coexist, even in the same person” (p. 73). However, I also consider the intervention of Dixson and Rousseau’s (2005), who stated that although there is no one voice for people of colour, “there is a common experience of racism that structures the stories of people of colour” (p. 11).

Recently, I presented a portion of this paper at a conference in Ottawa, Canada.² A very useful discussion ensued about the ethical tools we use to ensure ethical engagement with participants, such as consent or confidentiality forms, debriefing sessions, resources for counselling and support, etc. What remains unresolved for me, even as I write this paper, is whether or not these tools actually protect against ethical harm or support collaborative practices between researchers and participants. In particular, a very important question was raised by a panel member about how researchers decide which material to use and which narratives to leave out. Our choices will inevitably influence a dominant storyline within the body of our research. This question stayed with me and I agreed with my colleague that these concerns need more attention in our work as researchers. What we include and leave out is directly related to our values, histories, subjectivities (Hamden, 2009, p. 379). I end this paper following Humphrey (2013), who stated that the aim in our work is to become risk-aware as opposed to risk-averse, given the impossibility of eliminating risks (Humphrey, 2013, p. 582). And, although we cannot resolve all dilemmas fully, the practice of seeking them out and addressing them can be, in and of itself, movement toward ethical practice.

² Congress: Federation of Humanities and Social Sciences, Ottawa, Canada June 4, 2015

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Author Note

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Harjeet Badwall, School of Social Work, York University, S808 Ross Building, 4700 Keele Street, Toronto, ON, M3J 1P3, Canada. Email: hbadwall@yorku.ca