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## Researching Racism

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### Abstract

The author of this article completed a PhD thesis that focussed on Indigenous male perceptions of racism. He has also published on racism and has delivered public seminars on racism. Throughout this, he realised that racism remains a topic that people still lack an understanding of, and this is partly because they do not receive information about it. They are unaware of how Indigenous people perceive racism and it how it impacts on them. This article is intended to provide people with an understanding of racism from the perspective of Indigenous people and provide people with an understanding of the issues involved in the research of racism. The first part of the article will not refer to academic texts for support as the aim of this part is to provide Indigenous perspectives, so readers have an opportunity to hear these perspectives.

**Keywords:** Indigenous, Racism, Indigenous Perspectives, Subjectivity

**He Mihi – Acknowledgements:** There have been many Indigenous people who have taken the time to share their views on racism with me. Although there are too many to mention, I extend my deepest gratitude to all of you for

sharing your stories, experiences, and feelings with me.

Indigenous people living in Darwin contributed to this article by sharing their stories and experiences with me. I acknowledge these people for their generosity and time.

### Introduction

The purpose of this article is twofold. It will begin by providing people with an Indigenous perspective on racism and will do this without referring to books or journal papers as doing so weakens the Indigenous perspectives as their voices need to be supported with publications that they have in the main, not written or contributed to. It is important to do this as this perspective is something that most people do not encounter. The second part of the article will provide those interested in researching racism with an understanding of the issues involved in researching racism and how those who experience racism are critical in developing our understanding of it. The article is aimed at those who are about to or have recently entered the field of racism. It is also useful to those who have never thought deeply about racism and how we develop our knowledge and understanding of it.

### Indigenous Perspectives on Racism

This section has intentionally eliminated references to academic texts as the author feels it is important that Indigenous perspectives on

racism comes out strongly, so others have the opportunity to understand them. Most people do not get the opportunity to hear this perspective, so this article is an opportunity. As shown in the second part of the article, most Indigenous people do not get the opportunity to write about racism, and when they do, they are subject to political factors and publishing guidelines that can prevent them from sharing their true perspectives on racism.

I have completed a PhD thesis that focusses on Indigenous male perspectives of racism, have published papers on racism, and I have also delivered public seminars on racism. In completing all of these, I have spoken to other Indigenous people who have shared their perspectives on racism with me, and I have shared my perspectives with them.

There are definitions of racism, however, it is important to understand that Indigenous people have not contributed to these definitions. They may well have a different interpretation of racism and may well see it differently. From an Indigenous perspective, based on the author's life experiences and closed conversations with other Indigenous people, there are three main forms of racism that Indigenous people live with; *individual racism*, which occurs through personal encounters with other people, which can happen in daily settings (Pattel-Gray, 1994); *institutional racism*, the privileging and upholding of Western ideals and beliefs in social structures (Hollinsworth, 2006); and *internalised racism*, which is an acceptance by people who experience negative perceptions about themselves and attempt to be part of the dominant group (Jones, 2000).

Indigenous people are very familiar with racism, and lifelong experiences of their own and family and friends mean that they know it when they see it. Indigenous people start to see it from a young age, as young children. This starts for example, when they go to another child's birthday party and the adults present stare at them without staring at other children, or when they walk into a shop and are followed by people who work in the shop and they notice that other people are not being followed. At the core of their perceptions of racism is consistent inconsistencies. This means that they will have consistent experiences that are inconsistent with other people's

experiences. Often, they will notice these consistent inconsistencies and others will not. There is a feeling of anger in Indigenous people when they do notice these as they immediately ask why others are not having these experiences and accept that they are experiencing racism.

It is not uncommon to hear people say that people, such as Indigenous people, raise racism too much. This is one example of what people do not know about racism and how, without knowledge of it, they are prepared to make such statements. Typically, Indigenous people do not share their experiences of racism with others, as doing so is stressful and creates tension. They believe that if they do share their experiences of racism, they will be seen as a burden and a troublemaker. Because of this, they either keep their experiences to themselves or only share them with other Indigenous people. This is typically the only way Indigenous people can share their experiences without feeling stress and anxiety, and without going through uncomfortable and lengthy processes.

To Indigenous people, racism is at the core of their experiences of colonisation. The term *terra nullius* clearly implied that they were inferior to the colonisers and that the colonisers could just assert this. The White Australia Policy was another clear sign of racism towards Indigenous people, which clearly insinuated they were inferior and could easily be eliminated. Actions such as the removal of Indigenous children, the removal of Indigenous people from their traditional lands, and the low wages they received when other people received award wages, are clearly racism.

## Researching Racism

As a country, Australia does not know much about racism despite it being present for a long time. Today, it is a reoccurring theme in the media. One of the reasons we do not know much about it is because it is a topic that researchers avoid, organisations avoid, and governments avoid. This is why we hear so many misinformed comments about racism. The sensitive nature of racism has had a negative impact on researching it (Bulmer & Solomos, 2004). Sensitive topics, such as racism, can be threatening to institutions (Lee, 1993). The nature of racism in Australia

means that the people who will be upset by exposing racism and acknowledging it, are the majority of people employed in institutions and workplaces.

The approach of rejecting the presence of racism and failing to acknowledge it, is not helpful to our understanding of racism and result in those who experience it continuing to suffer its affects in silence, without support. This means that we need to rid ourselves of feeling upset by the presence of racism in order to understand it. This is particularly so if we want to call ourselves a multicultural society. If we are genuine about being a multicultural society, rather than avoid racism, we should try to understand it better.

If we truly want to understand racism, we should listen to the perspectives of those who typically experience it. This is important because racism can be present and can disadvantage people, even if others do not realise it (Brunton, 1993; Ridley, 1995; Stafford, 2007;). This often results in people making sweeping claims about racism, such as that it does not exist or that it is not a problem, however they cannot see it happening in their immediate workplace and cannot understand how it impacts on those who experience it. When people are not able to recognise racism, they are unable to make connections between it and other behaviours such as people leaving the workplace. Feagin and Sikes (1994) explain that Black people deal with racism by leaving. Christie (2006) explains that one of the reasons why people think they are having the experiences they are, can be because they think their experiences are invisible to others. Those who do not experience racism do not have the opportunity to see racism from the perspectives of those who do experience it (Adams et al., 2006). Branscombe et al. (1999) explain that if we want to understand the experiences of people who have been disadvantaged and excluded, we need to pay attention to them. Essed (1991) explains that racism has mainly been studied from the perspectives of white people, with little input from Black perspectives.

Feagin and Sikes (1994) agree, and state that in order to understand the realities of Black people, it is important to listen to their experiences. Essed (1991) argues that rather than gaining the

perspectives of those who do not experience racism, it is more insightful to gain the perspectives of those who do. It has been the perspectives of Black people that have forced white academics to acknowledge the presence of racism (Braham et al., 1992).

The lack of Black people involved in research on racism is important, as it could well be that Black people and others who experience racism, see it differently to people who do not experience it. Mellor et al., (2001) point out that those who do not experience racism do not understand the perspectives of those who do.

Just as it is important to have study participants who experience racism, it is especially important to have those who experience racism conduct research on racism. This is crucial as many Black people are not able to talk candidly to white people and are not able to talk honestly about race in the presence of white people (Dunier, 2004). Qualitative research methods are an ideal technique for people from one racial background to research people from the same racial background (Denscombe, 1998).

Having Black people share their experiences and insights with other Black people is the best way we can truly learn about racism. Qualitative research methods allow Indigenous researchers to identify with Indigenous study participants (Thomas & Brubaker, 2001). Researchers who share the same racial background as research participants are more suited to produce different data (Bailey, 1978) and research participants are more likely to reveal deeper opinions and thoughts (Young, 2004). Grenier (1998) states that Indigenous research must be designed to provide the perspectives of Indigenous people. One example of this in terms of racism is gender. Indigenous men and women experience racism in different ways (Dominelli, 2000 Nakata, 2001; Patton, 1982). Grenier (1998) states that it is important that research on Indigenous people take into consideration the different views of men and women. Researchers should take this into consideration and be considerate of the culture of the people they are researching. Ensuring that gender is represented in research on Indigenous people is important to Indigenous research (Roman, 2016).

Subjectivity should be seen as a positive, as an asset in racism research. Researchers who share the same cultural background as study participants share a common reality, and it is this reality that researchers set out to capture as new knowledge (Roman, 2016).

Subjectivity is important to qualitative research (Thyer, 2001). It provides researchers with an emotional and personal understanding of the research they are conducting (Yelloly & Henkel, 1995). Without the influence of subjectivity, research on topics such as racism would have little meaning (Thyer, 2001). For example, McMurray (1999) explains that it is important for those employed in Aboriginal health to be aware of the problems of Aboriginal patients from the perspective of Aboriginal patients. If Aboriginal patients are too ill or are unable to share this perspective, Aboriginal researchers are likely, either through their own experiences or the experiences of people they know, be able to share this perspective. According to Peshkin (1988), all researchers need to do if they are going to take a subjective approach, is to acknowledge this.

Using a qualitative approach to researching racism is the best way for people to understand racism. Qualitative research is appropriate as it is more interested in symbols and feelings (Bailey, 1978). It places more emphasis on people and situations rather than numerical information (Maxwell, 1996; Miles & Huberman, 1994;), and is more concerned with perceptions and personal experiences, and depth and detail (Patton, 1987). It provides the opportunity for study participants to express their feelings and perspectives direct to researchers (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 1999). This involves the likelihood of data being produced that may not have surfaced otherwise (Berg & Lune, 2001; Patton 1987; Taylor & Bogdan, 1984).

Researchers and study participants having close interaction is an important part of developing our understanding of racism. Essed (1991) recommends participant observation and semi-structured interviews as data collection methods to study racism. Carter and Delamont (1996) explain that the research they have conducted on racism has relied heavily on interacting closely with the people they are studying. Liamputtong and Ezzy (1999) insist that it is important for

researchers to have direct interaction with study participants when researching sensitive topics.

A qualitative approach to racism is also important as it is useful in the daily real-life situations of people who experience racism. Such an approach can be used to investigate the everyday behaviour and attitudes of people within institutions (Silverman, 2001) and allows people to refer to their everyday experiences to tell their stories about these experiences (Roman, 2016). Essed (1991) states that the most valuable technique to study racism is by revealing features of social life that cannot be pre-set or manufactured.

A story-telling approach is culturally appropriate for people who experience racism such as Indigenous people, as it has always been an important aspect of their culture (Attwood & Magowan, 2001; Fredericks, 2007; Taylor, 1992). They are also valuable in eliciting information about issues where little information exists (Ramirez & Hartel, 2001). A story-telling approach is useful for sensitive research topics such as racism, as it allows Indigenous people to share their experiences in a way that they choose to rather than being asked specific questions that may miss facts that they consider to be important.

## **Ethics and Racism Research**

As stated above, because of the sensitive nature of racism, it is a topic that researchers avoid, and organisations are not keen on accommodating. There is one simple way to get around this, and that is by the researcher interviewing study participants away from their workplace and allowing them to tell stories without mentioning their employer or the names of other people, and by ensuring study participants that their contributions will be confidential and at no stage of the research or the publications of the research, will their names or the names of their employers be mentioned. This is a simple approach that eliminates researchers seeking approval from employers, schools, and organisations about a topic that these organisations and services providers could be uncomfortable with, and it is also an approach that protects study participants from possible ramifications and prevents them from experiencing distress that is associated with participating in the research. Roman (2016) states

that researchers conducting research on Indigenous topics should be clear about what they are going to do, including how they are going to recruit study participants. This approach to researching racism should alleviate any concerns that ethics committees have with the research, particularly in relation to the organisation or employer and the wellbeing and safety of study participants.

## Conclusion

The aim of this article is to be accessible to all people. It is the author's view that such an article is important as the more accessible information is about racism, the more we can understand it. It is hoped that this article has achieved two objectives, provided people with insight into racism from an Indigenous perspective, and provided those interested in researching racism with an understanding of some of the issues involved in racism and some of the ways to improve our understanding of racism through research. The article suggests that in order to better understand racism, we should encourage researchers who share the same racial background as those who experience racism to research racism as doing so will make research participants feel safe and comfortable and they will be more likely to truly express themselves.

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