

**Chadderton, C. (2012) Problematizing the role of the white researcher in social justice research. *Ethnography and Education* 7:3 pp. 363-380.**

This paper contributes to the debate on decolonizing methodologies in qualitative research by considering how a white researcher can try and destabilise white supremacy when explicitly conducting research with social justice aims. It draws on data from a recent ethnographic study of minority ethnic pupils' experiences in secondary schools in England, and interrogates the tensions between the research aim to challenge racial stereotyping in education, and issues of race and power emerging from the research process. The paper investigates specifically the ways in which interaction is shaped by – frequently hidden, particularly to those privileged by them - structures of white supremacy. Developing an innovative analytical framework which draws on insights from both Critical Race Theory and the work of Judith Butler, the researcher problematises issues of voice and representation in conducting social justice research. It is argued that an approach which engages with elements of both structural and poststructural theory allows a more critical exploration of white supremacy through an understanding of the performativity of race. The author works towards a possible research methodology which not only takes into account, but also tries to destabilise processes of white supremacy in research by both recognising participants' efforts to do this, and trying to make researchers better able to take responsibility for their own complicity in perpetuating unequal racial structures. It is argued that such a recognition by white researchers will necessarily be an uncomfortable process.

## **Introduction**

This article considers some of the tensions and challenges faced by a white<sup>1</sup>, female researcher in raising questions about how successfully research methodologies which try to challenge processes of white supremacy might be employed. There has been much debate in recent years around the ways in which research methodologies can potentially avoid contributing to white supremacy (e.g. Tuhiwai-Smith 1999; Bishop 2005; Gunaratnam 2003).

The research project discussed in this paper had explicit social justice aims from the outset, moreover, I was aware of both the role of ethnographic research in the continued oppression of marginalised groups, and of the ethical issues of white researchers researching race (e.g. Archer 2003). I therefore drew on insights from Critical Race Theory when designing the project in order to try to address issues of power and representation from the start. However, despite my efforts to challenge neutrality in research, to be aware of structural discrimination, and to foreground the voices of the young people in the study, I initially had to question the chosen methodology. I found myself – albeit unwittingly - perpetuating structures of white supremacy.

In this article, I discuss aspects of my shifting methodology in relation to racial structures. This is neither a linear nor a complete story. In order to foreground some of the issues, I take two examples of focus group discussions with minority ethnic students which at first reading, seemed not to have provided the data I was hoping for on racial structures in education. I then reflect on wider methodological issues around ethnographic research in general, and more specifically on the role of race in ethnographic study. In doing so, I attempt to move towards a methodology for destabilising whiteness in research, using insights from both critical and poststructural theories. Although these two theoretical positions are often thought to be antagonistic to each other (Peters 2001), elsewhere I have argued that they can expand each other if used in pursuit of a common political goal (Chadderton 2009): in this case to enhance our understanding of the way in which structures of oppression operate, and perhaps recognising ways in which they can be destabilised. I consequently provide more critical readings of the examples which do, on second reading, provide important data on structures of white supremacy in research.

## **Conducting the study**

The research was planned as an ethnographic study focussing on minority ethnic students' school experiences in two inner-city secondary schools in the north-west of England. This was considered a timely subject, as it can be argued we are living at a time when the discourse that race issues have been dealt with and no longer shape identities and experiences in the UK as they once did, has gained much currency: Firstly, several laws have been passed requiring schools to actively promote racial equality; secondly, some argue that the western world is now 'post-racial'<sup>II</sup>- by which they tend to mean that race is no longer seen to matter; thirdly, identities, including racial identities, in a world influenced by poststructural and neo-liberal thinking, are seen as fluid and multiple, which is sometimes misunderstood as meaning they are a matter of free choice (McRobbie 2009). However, inequalities between ethnic groups persist in UK schools. For example, black students and students of Pakistani and Bangladeshi origin continue to underachieve in the GCSE examinations which mark the end of compulsory schooling in England (DfES 2007). Black children are consistently entered for lower papers in these exams, meaning that even if they get the highest possible marks on these papers, they will never achieve pass marks (Gillborn 2005). In addition, black students are still over-represented in expulsions from school (Gillborn 2005; Parsons 2009). Despite these inequalities, since the mid-1980's, in the main, educational policy has been deracialised, with a focus on inclusion and exclusion in general, which suggests an aim to include those who are 'excluded' into the dominant culture, rather than addressing inequalities (see Tomlinson 2005). In this context, my research questions included:

- What discourses of race and diversity circulate in the classroom?
- How do students and teachers negotiate these discourses?
- How is racism addressed by the school?

Data was collected at two inner-city schools in northern England. School 1 is a large comprehensive school for boys aged 11-16. Over 50% of the students are of Asian heritage and about 26% are white. Other groups include Chinese, black African and African Caribbean. Most students come from severely disadvantaged areas. School 2 is a comprehensive school for girls aged 11-18. Students come from a range of social and economic backgrounds but there are pockets of considerable deprivation in the school's catchment area. Students are from a diverse range of ethnic backgrounds, the largest groups being Pakistani, White, Black African and Black Caribbean.

The study took a broadly ethnographic approach. Fieldwork was conducted over 18 months and combined interviews and focus groups with staff and pupils, lesson observations and the examination of teaching materials. I say 'broadly ethnographic' because although I spent many months at each school, several difficulties were encountered, resulting in quite a 'messy', research study (Mirza 1995). Access to schools was only achieved after a long, frustrating struggle and multiple attempts to contact institutions. Access also often had to be negotiated afresh for each individual visit, and arrangements were regularly cancelled or postponed. 1-2 days per month on average were spent at each school, including 32 formal observations and numerous informal. It proved very difficult to gain student participants, and this was achieved in a different way not only in each school, but also each time I conducted a discussion group. Student focus groups were eventually conducted with seven groups at School 1, and eight at School 2, with students who at the time were in Year 10 (aged 15-16). In total, 46 pupils took part in focus groups across the two schools. I had intended to speak to each group once per term. This was not possible for all groups. I managed to speak to most groups twice, a couple three times, some only once, but some of these were supplemented

with informal chats. I chose to conduct discussion groups with the students rather than one-to-one interviews in the hopes of relaxing them. I didn't want them to feel interrogated, and I wanted them to bounce ideas off each other. As Archer (2003) points out, discussion groups

provide a means for eliciting jointly constructed discourses and for examining interactions between respondents and interviewers in the construction of these discourses. (p.40)

I do, however, accept that certain points of view could be suppressed or encouraged in front of a group, so the method also has disadvantages (ibid). Individual, semi-structured interviews were conducted with a small sample of staff (9 in all). These were mostly with the teachers I had observed and members of senior staff if possible. Formal interviews, focus groups and observations were audio recorded, and fieldnotes were taken of informal chats and observations. I made use of a research diary (Altrichter and Holly 2010) in which I noted snippets of information, conversations or altercations I heard while at the schools, so as to map my feelings over time, recognise trends and wider structures and to make connections between what I observed and experienced in the field, and the theory I was reading. I used this diary to write about my shifting understanding of processes of racial positioning and through the diary, became more aware of the role I, as researcher, played in the study.

As will become clear in the discussion below, analysis of the data cannot easily be separated from methodology. Research aims, questions, data generation, data analysis, interpretation and the subjectivity of the researcher herself are all inextricably related (Pillow 2003a).

Whilst in the field, the research diary allowed me to engage in ongoing data analysis, which then fed into the data generation and helped develop the theoretical and methodological framework discussed here. Indeed, my research journey was far from linear (Hermes 1999),

as the intersection of different issues encountered meant that aims, methodology, interpretation and my own subjectivity shifted throughout.

### **Ethnography and race**

Ethnographic research has been deeply implicated in the oppression of marginalised groups (Bishop 2005; Parker Webster and John 2010). Research has been used to “objectify, exploit and dominate” marginalised groups (Delgado Bernal 1998, 558) by misrepresenting them and contributing to the maintenance of oppressive social structures. Both in the past and today, white people have spoken for and about people from other ethnic groups and have thus contributed to the continued marginalisation of non-white voices (Tuhiwai Smith 1999). For example, complex educational problems have been explained away through alleged biological or cultural deficiencies, minority groups’ concerns have been ignored, and race as a determiner of educational experience has been downplayed in favour of issues of class (Duncan 2002; Parker and Lynn 2002).

There are those who argue that only members of a given social group should conduct research on that group, as firstly they will automatically have shared experiences of oppression (Pillow 2003a), and secondly this will avoid the issue of differential power relations between researcher and researched. Indeed, this view disrupted the more common notion that one should not study one’s own community because of the risk of bias (Pillow 2003a). The critiques of this argument however, are well-rehearsed. Firstly, it

assumes a single 'truth' which can be tapped through respondents' accounts and that the accounts given to the white interviewer will be a distortion of that 'truth'. Accounts are treated as either accurate or distorted representations of a single reality rather than as situated and contingent, creative mappings of a complex and multifaceted reality or realities. (Rhodes 1994, cited by Gunaratnam 2003, 56)

Secondly, it assumes monoculturality in race, which essentialises individuals along ethnic lines, and positions racial identity as more important than other identities- gender, age, interests, class (Gunaratnam 2003). In addition, people belong to so many different groups, racial, class, gender, age, that it would be impossible to match all these differences anyway (Alcoff 1991). Lastly, as Pillow (2003b) argues, matching researcher and respondents does not necessarily equal out power relations. Indeed, all research can be seen as exploitative in nature as it ultimately tends to serve more directly the interests and purposes of the researcher, not necessarily always those of the respondent (Kvale 2006). Moreover, leaving the study of race and racism to people who belong to ethnic minorities may further marginalise them and indeed makes racism a minority problem (Weiler 2001). On the contrary, Alcoff (1991) and Knowles (2003) argue that it is the responsibility of those who belong to privileged groups to speak out against oppression, as we are all implicated in oppressive structures.

Much more important than trying to match up researcher and researched along lines of race, class and gender, are the assumptions underpinning the study. As Marker (2003), an indigenous scholar researching indigenous peoples in North America, writes:

[w]hile a number of indigenous scholars have proposed that non-natives should not be doing research in tribal communities any longer, this misses the fundamental problem. Elsewhere I have argued that 'the quality of research is not improved *simply* by having Aboriginal people

doing the writing. It is improved by a more detailed analysis that includes the perspectives and location of both Natives and non-Natives' (Marker 2000, 31). This means an analysis of history, hegemony and self (p. 367).

As my study was driven by a concern to promote social justice and anti-racism, and aimed to challenge racial stereotypes, I chose to employ a Critical Race Methodology. Critical Race Theory (CRT) was developed originally in the US from Critical Legal Studies, and has more recently been employed by educational researchers in the UK (Roberts and Parker 2005; Gillborn 2005). The main task of CRT when employed as a methodological tool is to reveal, unpick and challenge racial structures in the education system by rendering (unequal) power relations visible (Duncan 2002; Parker and Lynn 2002). Although there are several tenets of CRT (see e.g. Ladson-Billings 1998), for the purposes of this article, I focus on two main tenets. Firstly, CRT analyses racism as an endemic form of structural discrimination referred to as white supremacy, which is embedded in the systems and structures of society. White supremacy, in this case, does not refer to neo-Nazi type groups who perpetrate acts of violence against non-white groups (although this is also a feature of such a regime), rather it describes a hegemonic social system which normalises the disadvantage of ethnic minorities and the privilege of white people by influencing attitudes, policy and interaction. This contrasts with the more liberal, multicultural view of racism as aberrant, conscious, individual and visible acts (Parker and Lynn 2002). The task of critical race methodologists is to identify, interrogate and challenge the often covert ways in which white supremacy functions to disadvantage minority ethnic groups (Roithmayr 1999; Lazos Vargas 2003).

Secondly, a CRT methodology lays emphasis on the voices and experiences of people from minority ethnic groups. This builds on the ethnographic tradition of gathering the perspectives of the researched in order to better understand a specific situation; however it



contains an additional explicitly political goal to challenge the experience of the white majority as the normative standard (Delgado Bernal 2002; Solorzano and Yosso 2002). It can therefore be seen as contributing to a specific type of ethnographic work with social justice aims, which has recognised the need to bring in voices which have traditionally been silenced in order to foreground the perspectives of marginalised groups (Flores 2000; Delgado Bernal 1998), as a way of allowing subjects to self-define (Ladson-Billings and Donner 2005; Pillow 2003b), and challenges more traditional notions of ethnographic study which claim to provide a neutral and objective (Solorzano and Yosso 2002). Such research often takes the form of gathering counterstories from members of oppressed groups, which provide an alternative perspective to dominant and oppressive stereotypes. In a CRT methodology, the experiences and realities of marginalised groups are accepted as the foundation of knowledge (Delgado Bernal 2002). I wanted to understand things from the students' perspective and capture the frequently marginalised and misrepresented voices of minority ethnic students. I assumed that I would be able to access people's perspectives, and hoped these would provide an 'authentic' understanding of their social reality (McWilliam et al 2009). However, as I will discuss, this research design threw up tensions and challenges of its own.

### **Problematising research objectives**

Although my intention was to identify counter narratives in order to challenge negative discourses around minority ethnic students, some of my initial interviews with the young people seemed to offer data which appeared to be racially or culturally essentialising. I felt that lack of trust between strangers (Glesne 2006), for example, did not go far enough in accounting for this data (although it must certainly play a role), and began to re-examine notions of white supremacy. I now consider two pieces of data as examples from my early

interviews which allow me to critically reflect on the way white supremacy functions and my own role in generating this data. Whilst the more subtle ways in which a researcher can (unwittingly) contribute to white supremacy may be clear to more experienced researchers, to me, as a novice researcher, it was not immediately obvious.

At this point, it is important to issue a caveat: as others have argued, just 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), and this is therefore not my aim in this paper. Indeed, such an analysis will be, and should be, uncomfortable for the researcher. Equally, any attempt to step outside the structures of white supremacy is inevitably incomplete because individuals are constantly being interpolated from other spaces, that is, they continue to be understood as white by others (Leonardo 2009). However, Ignatiev (1997a, b) argues that any violation of the rules of whiteness is a move towards the abolition of white supremacy as a category of privilege. The aim of what Ignatiev refers to as 'race traitors' is to destroy race privilege through both small and large acts. Whilst it is recognised that this can never be achieved by individuals acting alone, Ignatiev writes that if enough white people refuse to benefit from white privilege, whiteness, as a signifier of privilege will no longer be upheld. In the context of research, making white supremacy explicit can perhaps be seen as a tiny step towards this ultimate goal. This is because whiteness, both as an ethnic group and as a dominant societal structure, does not tend to acknowledge itself. Its unnamed status means it is frequently positioned as the universal or neutral position or point of view (Solorzano and Yosso 2002), particularly understood as such by those who enjoy this privilege (Ahmed 2004). Thus the naming of white supremacy does disrupt the assumed racial neutrality of both discursive and real spaces. The following examples have been chosen because they provide good examples of moments when raced subjects are constituted

– however, these are not the only examples of such moments in my data, nor are my interpretations the only possible ones.

In the first example, a group of boys from school 1 of African Caribbean origin seem to refuse to talk about racism. This was our second meeting, but first extended interview. After changing the subject a couple of times, one participant went quiet and put his ipod on, while the others also avoided an answer. Up to this point the discussion had been very open, especially on the subjects of music and teachers. But when I asked the group directly about racism, they were silent.

*Charlotte: Have any of the teachers ever been racist?*

*Rob: No, not that I know of. I know that I'm not (answers very fast and says nothing more for several minutes. No one else answers).*

In the context of discussing teachers they dislike, the boys give reasons other than racism for Mr Saunders' behaviour, and do not answer my question directly.

*Rob: I was messing about with another kid, but Mr Saunders thought it was serious. But he dragged me out of the way, and he's using force and I'm only in year 7 or 8<sup>III</sup>.*

*Avery: There was another incident where one of my mates wouldn't let me pass, so he (Mr Saunders) put his foot out deliberately so my mate fell over him*

*Charlotte: So do you think that's just aggression or do you think it's racism?*

*Martin: He can't get fun himself, that's why*

*Avery: Oh yeah, I've seen him at my sister's primary school. And I said, "Alright sir", and he said, "Don't talk to me. Outside school I don't know you". I went up to him and put my hand on his shoulder, and he goes, "Don't touch me, I don't know you. I'll break your fingers if you do that again".*

*Rob: I'd have laughed.*

*Martin: Yeah, you should have laughed in his face!*

Although I felt there may have been a racist aspect to Mr Saunders' behaviour, the boys seem to define him as a bad teacher, rather than a racist teacher. I was concerned that this silence around racism could be interpreted as a non-existence of racism.

Equally in the following example of a discussion with three girls from school 2 of African Caribbean origin about school exclusions, some of what they say could be understood as suggesting that black girls deserve to be excluded. Again, this was our first extended interview, which took place in an empty common room.

*Charlotte: Do they exclude a lot of people here?*

*Ilona: Yeah, a load got excluded yesterday. And haven't you noticed? It's only like black people, black or mixed race.*

*Sam: Can I just say, yeah, half the badly behaved girls of this school are black.*

*Ilona: Mixed race or black.*

*Sam: I only know one or two white girls that are very bad...*

*Charlotte: So why are they excluding so many black girls?*

*Sam: I don't know if they brought it on themselves or if the teachers just decided to pick on them.*

*Jaya: It's just that the way my mum brought me up yeah, if anyone says anything to you and you think it's out of place, do not stand there and not open your mouth... Cos when they say something bad to me, I'm not gonna stand there and take it... Why do you have the right to tell me to shut up like that? They talk to most of the black people in here like they're nothing.*

*Ilona: I think they think that people with black in them, like mixed race as well, like are nuisances I think... One other thing is, come on, most black people are loud! (Laughter.) But they pick on people that are loud, have a loud personality...*

Despite the fact that some of what they say suggests that the high levels of exclusions among black and mixed heritage girls is linked to teacher perceptions, all three girls make comments which appear to confirm the stereotypes dominant in the UK which suggest that black pupils behave badly and threaten order at school. How was I to understand the young people's voices?

### **Raced spaces, race-as-performed**

Of course it is possible that as I was a virtual stranger, lack of trust may mean that the young people said what they thought I wanted to hear, or were not comfortable sharing such personal information (Glesne 2006). However, even if this was the case, I felt that this could not account totally for this and other, similar data, and also, with other, personal information, the young people were very forthcoming. Two bodies of literature helped me reflect critically on the role of white supremacy in research and the ways in which it may have shaped the interaction.

Firstly, I revisited CRT. I realised that in my initial focus groups, I had unwittingly considered the interview space as a neutral, unracialised space. I had believed simply by conducting the research, I would not contribute to white supremacy. I had neglected to take into account the fact that the interview is situated, a space like any other, where social structures impact on the interaction. Critical race theorists argue that all social interaction has a racial aspect to it:

...even if race is not specifically mentioned, the starting point is that race plays a role in social interaction (Duncan 2002, 87)

A system of white supremacy, which in a UK context privileges groups and individuals who can be considered white British, implicates *all* members of a given society – although the implication may be unwitting. White supremacy is such a deeply engrained, pervasive and normalising system, that the racial structures in which we are all positioned remain frequently invisible (Ladson-Billings 1998; Gillborn 2005), particularly to those who they privilege. The data need to be considered in the light of racial power relations not only in wider society, *but in the interview as well*. Although I had not presumed to produce neutral research, I *had* unwittingly considered myself a racially neutral researcher, in that I had not taken into account the way in which I, like the respondents, am positioned by white supremacy. In not recognising my own racial positioning, I had failed to recognise the ways in which structures of white supremacy would impact on the interview situation, and thus contributed to reinforcing white supremacy. As Leonardo (2004) explains, white supremacy is maintained through a process of acts perpetrated against minority ethnic people by whites, and it is this process to which I was contributing.

Secondly, I was aided by poststructural theory. Poststructuralist theorists have pointed out that much ethnographic work is underpinned by problematic assumptions about ‘truth’ (Popoviciu et al 2010). Interviewing still tends to be regarded as a way to discover an alternative ‘truth’ with which to challenge hegemonic discourses. Poststructuralists have argued instead that meaning is unstable and language is not an accurate representation of reality (Weedon 1999; St Pierre 2000), which calls into question ethnography itself as a research method (Popoviciu et al 2010). Indeed, it cannot be assumed that ethnography reflects ‘reality’ (Lenzo 1995), nor that a researcher can access a perceived ‘reality’. A reconceptualisation of the function of ethnographic work is therefore required. Rather than

the more traditional aim of providing fixed knowledge about groups, ethnography can instead be considered as providing an insight or interpretation into a particular phenomenon.

The work of poststructuralist thinker, Judith Butler (1993, 1997, 2004), can also help provide a more complex understanding of ethnographic work. Most useful for my study was Butler's notion of identities as being discursively and performatively constituted. Butler theorises that identities are something we 'do', not that we 'are', and we perform these, often unwittingly, in different ways in different situations. She refers to a process of 'performativity', which should not be confused with 'a performance'; it should not mislead and suggest insincerity: no identity is considered more 'real' than another. Identities are seen as dynamic and continually being formed and re-formed by social interaction and discourse, rather than being static, fixed or essential. Butler herself mostly applied this concept to sex and gender, but it has recently been argued that her work can also help us understand race (Nayak 2006). Race is therefore understood in Butlerian terms as performed. The notion that the subject is discursively constituted allows us to understand the effects of multiple and contradictory discourses on identity, and the way that subjects can be complicit in their own oppression, as raced discourses and practices actually produce and reproduce bodies and subjects that are raced.

These considerations informed my developing methodology. I understand race as both an overriding social structure, which shapes interaction and perceptions, *and* performed, by which I mean a social construction which is shifting and fluid. I also began to understand my study as an exploration of social positioning, rather than viewing participants as representatives of a group:

The point of analysis is not to reveal the individual subject but to investigate the processes of subjectification (Davies and Gannon 2005, 320)

Racial positioning and identity are not just topics that were discussed in the interviews; they were also performed and negotiated during the interviews (Nayak 2006). I examined how the participants *and myself, the researcher* 'do' race and ethnicity in the interview (Gunaratnam 2003,117). In every situation, we are all defined by racial structures which ultimately privilege whiteness. However, these are negotiated by each of us and should be unpicked when the data is analysed (Nayak 2006). I kept the following questions in mind when interpreting the data:

- How did structures of whiteness play out in the field?
- In what ways, when and how are racial identities claimed or resisted by individuals?
- How did I construct and perform whiteness, and how did my participants react to this and position themselves in relation to me?
- How am I constructed by whiteness?

### **Analysing whiteness**

Informed then, by a closer reading of CRT, and drawing on insights from poststructural theories, I attempt a critical reading of this data, my main aim being an exploration of racial positioning. In the discussion with the boys, I had implicitly presumed myself to be unimplicated in power structures and 'raceless', and yet expected the participants to talk about the ways in which they are implicated, thus positioning them as 'raced'. More conscious now of my own participation in the construction of the subject position of others, I realised that the boys may have linked me to the school as part of the "white" establishment



as I had been introduced to them by a senior teacher. By interviewing a group of young African Caribbean men, I had set up binaries of researcher/researched, white/ African Caribbean, female/male, adult/youth, and in doing so, had contributed to a fixing and essentialising of identities whilst actually hoping to challenge such binaries. Indeed, most of the pupils who took part in my discussion groups belonged to a minority ethnic group or minority religion or both, as I specifically aimed to speak to those who are raced by popular and political discourses around race and difference. In order to explore the idea that ethnic minorities are positioned by discourses which construct them as separate, essentialised groups, I sometimes asked for a group who self-identified as 'black' or Muslim. In the event though, the teachers chose the participants, and thus most probably the young people were not given the chance to self-define, but were defined by their mostly white teachers and myself, a white researcher. This categorisation is not neutral, indeed, it re-produces racial difference (Noble 2005). Thus while trying to gather data with which to challenge racial structures, I found myself unwittingly and unwillingly, but nevertheless, complicit in those very structures. Truman & Humphries (1994) point out that categorising people for research purposes is only ethically defensible if the focus of the study is not their ethnicity (or indeed, gender, disability), but rather their experiences of the ways in which they are positioned in social structures, in order to better understand the process by which inequalities are maintained. However, since the young people had been racially categorised by the grouping, this remains as a tension in my study.

By questioning the participants about racism, it could also be argued that I reinforced race as important, and reinforced raced identities (Pillow 2003a). The boys wanted to talk about other things: school subjects and music, but I drew a boundary between us on grounds of race and colour, assuming that they have experiences related to race, and I, as a white woman, do

not (see Watson and Scraton 2001). At the same time, my fixing of raced identities contrasts with the young people's struggles to move *beyond* race: Not answering, or answering a question other than the one posed, can be seen as agency (Mazzei 2004; Jackson 2003) – in this case, it could be argued that the boys were resisting the racial binaries. Since the power of whiteness is based upon its silence, the silences of identity in those marked as racial could signal a destabilisation of white supremacy (Gunaratnam 2003, 114).

Only when I listened to the tape afterwards, did I realise that the participants had mentioned racism several times when I had not asked them directly. By talking about racism in a context of their choice rather than mine, they resisted this racial binary. From this point on, I changed my approach, stopped asking participants directly about racism, and I found that they spoke about it on their own terms.

*Charlotte: So what do you think of the teachers here in general then?*

*Rob: I think there is a racist teacher in this school, you know. He's racist, he does not like Asian people and black people. I tell you, he only picks on Asian or black people. If a white person messes about, yeah, he lets them out and keeps us half an hour break. He's a racist, man. I don't like him.*

Equally with the data from the girls, rather than viewing it as a transparent representation of a single truth, I saw the young people as positioning themselves in wider discourses, and negotiating the various discourses available to them. Many of these discourses are essentialising, and individuals will, at times, perform essentialised identities which have been performed onto them by others (Youdell 2006). The girls' words could also be understood as strategic essentialism, as a mobilisation of essential identities as political resistance (Ang-Lygate 1997; Ladson-Billings and Donnor 2005). Thus comments which appear to confirm

stereotypes should be understood in the light of these possibilities. The traditional notion of simply letting the data ‘emerge’ from the interviews runs the risk of reinforcing stereotypes and inequalities, as race often cannot be ‘heard’, particularly by white people.

As explained above, other sources suggest that there is a higher rate of exclusions among black and mixed race students than other ethnic groups. The most recent exclusion figures available for this school confirm this: nearly a quarter of girls who identified as mixed race (white and black Caribbean) or black Caribbean were excluded for a fixed period, compared to 23 out of 354 girls who identified as white British (OFSTED February 2003). A CRT analysis of school exclusion would take into account the unprecedented rate of exclusions from British schools, the CRT view that schooling reproduces the same racist structures seen in wider society (Duncan 2002), the dominant discourses that hold that the school system is essentially a fair and racially equal system to which minority ethnic students present an intrinsic problem or a threat (Ladson-Billings 1998; Lynn and Parker 2006), the over-surveillance of minority ethnic students (Blair 2000), the positioning of black identity as anti-educational (Duncan 2002), the ways in which many young black people try to resist these negative positionings (Fordham 1996). The girls in the discussion group will negotiate these discourses, as Butler argues, both as they discuss others, and shifting between different racial positionings in the interview setting itself.

### **Drawing out perspectives**

#### *Problematizing notions of voice*

My analysis, however, is problematic from the point of view of the original aims of my project and of much social justice research: to capture participants’ voices, access peoples’

realities, and allow subjects to self-define. As my examples demonstrate, analysing, interpreting and representing the data is inevitably a subjective process and the way discussions and participants are represented depends to a large extent on the researcher's interpretation. In fact, it could be argued that this study, with which I had aimed to challenge white hegemony and privilege participants' voices, is recentring my own voice: a white voice. The participants have not had the chance to influence directly how they have been represented. Ultimately, all decisions are made by me, the researcher: all editing, all presentation and interpretation of data (Crozier 2003; Marker 2003; Jackson and Mazzei 2009).

Some poststructural theorists have grappled with this, arguing that it is naïve to think that participants' voices are being represented in research, referring to "the fiction of restoring lost voices" (Lather 2007, 38). They argue that the belief that a researcher can free respondents' authentic voices actually neglects to consider the role of the researcher in the research process and the exploitative nature of research. Even feminist attempts to democratise research cannot change the fact that voices are "*necessarily* distorted and fictionalised in the process of reinscription" (Jackson and Mazzei 2009, 2 original italics). Pillow (2003b) suggests that the ethnographer inevitably has a colonising gaze because representation is linked to practices of domination.

Moreover, poststructuralists have called into question the automatic linking of voice or perspective to experience or identity, arguing that this is based on the notion that experience is connected to 'authentic' knowing (St Pierre 2000; Mazzei 2009; Lather 2009). Although many critical race theorists argue that an experience of racism gives ethnic minorities a common awareness or viewpoint (e.g. Tate 1997; Hidalgo 1999), poststructuralists argue that

the belief in the primacy of experience rests on a liberal-humanist assumption that subjectivity is the coherent, authentic source of the interpretation of the meaning of 'reality' (Weedon 1997, 8), and that assumptions of a unitary experience of oppression can essentialise individual experience (Peters and Burbules 2004) and reinscribe individuals into homogenous groups. Making fixed links between experience and knowledge can risk reinscribing people into monolithic identities if it is not problematised (Weiler 2001). It has been argued that while lived experience often does heighten a person's awareness of power and marginalisation, and the experience of oppression will impact on subjectivities, oppression is not experienced in the same ways by individuals, neither does the experience of oppression automatically equal an awareness of it and the structures which allow it to operate (Weiler 2001; Crozier 2003; Leonardo 2004). Equally, it is important to emphasise that experience can be used to disempower, if it is informed by, for example, racism or sexism (hooks 1994). In addition, the notion that a subject can and does self-define has been challenged. Poststructuralist notions of identity as discursively and performatively constituted preclude the notion of authentic voice. While this does not mean that the opportunity for self-definition in research should be dismissed, it does mean that the notion itself should be problematised.

In order to try and ensure that participants' voices are heard, some researchers have argued respondents should be involved in the interpretation, analysis and even writing up of the data (Parker Webster and John 2010). However, this is not always possible or practical, and again, poststructuralists have argued that even when participants *are* involved, this still does not make voices more 'authentic', nor does it liberate the researcher from the exploitative nature of research (Lather 2001). Indeed, this would assume there is a single reality which the

researcher can access if she uses the 'right' methods, a notion also called into question by poststructuralists (ibid).

*The researcher as the 'unreliable narrator'*

These are all especially relevant issues when researching marginalised groups who have been pathologised and misrepresented by research. However, such poststructural critiques risk paralysing the ethnographic researcher. I therefore reconceptualised the notions of voice which informed my research, both the participants' voices and my own, taking into account insights from both critical and poststructural theories. Whilst still explicitly foregrounding the young people's voices, I was careful to consider them neither as representative of a group, nor as 'authentic' or single, 'true' reflections of their identities.

Researchers can never fully represent voices as non-innocent, nonproblematic, or noncontaminated; language is not transparent, voices do not speak for themselves, and referents always slip away (Jackson 2003, 704).

I analysed the voices as multiple, contradictory and shifting (Flores 2000). This allowed me to challenge my own initial, implicit assumptions that the young people would speak about race from a specific perspective because of their ethnic backgrounds. I presented my study as a combination participants' perspectives (plural and shifting), with my own standpoint (also plural and shifting), as one reading of a situation as the participants describe it and I interpret it. However, vitally, the analysis starts from the stand point of the marginalised.

The advantage of beginning our analysis of domination from the objective position of those who receive policies of domination puts educators on the side of the oppressed, or at least an understanding of history from their conditions. (Leonardo 2004,141)

I have now explicitly situated myself in the research and the text (Hermes 1999; Hidalgo 1999), rejecting the notion of neutrality, including racial neutrality, by exploring racial positioning. However, like the participants, my voice can be contradictory and shifting. I avoid positioning myself as expert, rather I see myself as an ‘unreliable narrator’ and the stories I tell can only ever be partial (Halewood 1997).

### *Theorising round participants’ perspectives*

Rather than theorising *over* participants’ words, I try to theorise *round* them, explicitly taking into account structures of privilege and marginalisation which define us all, and the way in which we perform and negotiate these. If participants’ words are not put into the context of oppressive, raced discourses, I would still somehow have been silencing them.

[A] complete retreat from speech is of course not neutral since it allows the continued dominance of current discourses and acts by omission to reinforce their dominance. (Alcoff 1991, 20)

I see theorising *round* participants’ words as playing off the tensions between structural and poststructural notions of voice by aiming on the one hand to address individual experience by showing how it relates to power structures, but on the other hand recognising competing and contradictory subjectivities and demonstrating the different social interests impacting on these subjectivities (Weedon 1997).

## **An attempt to destabilise white supremacy?**

In this article I have explored the ways in which racial structures influence the interview situation, arguing that this is complex and unpredictable (Archer 2003). Whilst identities should, to a certain extent, be understood as shifting and fluid, these identities are still underpinned by essentialised understandings of race, and they cannot be understood as a matter of choice – agency is limited by the discourses available (Butler 1993). Neither researcher-matching, nor a withdrawal from ethnographic work, would necessarily adequately solve issues of power and representation in research – as (Allen 2006) writes, “[w]e are all subject to these discourses and the limitations they place on our understandings, whatever our (ethnic group)” (p.173).

As my own methods of collecting and analysing data evolved, I understood that the methodology adopted by researchers needs to be flexible and responsive to the field and the analysis (Hermes 1999). As racial inequality remains such an important issue in education, we need to conduct research which in some way explicitly acknowledges the ways in which we are all constructed by racial structures, and also aims to destabilise these structures. A poststructural understanding of identity would suggest that no category, including whiteness, is ultimately stable or fixed (Butler 1993), and it should therefore be possible to destabilise it.

In order to do this, it seems firstly key to recognise what seems to be a contradictory understanding of identity, one which draws on insights from both poststructural theory and critical theory: On the one hand, identities as discursively and performatively constituted. On the other hand, a recognition of the strength and all-pervasiveness of racial structures, which mean that despite the fact that race is performed, it is also experienced as ‘real’ and shapes our realities – both those regarded as ‘raced’, and those who consider themselves to be



'raceless'. Secondly, by tracing the way discourses shape identities and interaction, racial positioning in research can be rendered visible, thus explicitly challenging the perceived neutrality of whiteness. Competing and contradictory discourses and subjectivities can also be recognised, which allows for a more complex understanding of the data, and ensures against the essentialisation of participants. Thirdly, it is necessary for researchers to take as their starting point the narratives of the oppressed group, and theorise round these narratives. Narratives link subjective experiences to common experiences and theory (Lazos Vargas 2003), and they should therefore be foregrounded. However, neither the voices of participants nor the voice of the researcher should be presented as 'authentic' or representative. Rather they should be explicitly understood as shifting and plural. This avoids essentialising participants' voices, but also, potentially allows white researchers to attempt to destabilise the supremacy of whiteness by situating the knowledge we produce in ethnographic research as located, partial and subjective.

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<sup>I</sup> I use ethnic categories strategically, while acknowledging the risks of reification and the ethics of naming, and the fact that such ethnic categories tend to be unrepresentative and inaccurate descriptions of those they pertain to describe. I accept the meaning of race is ambiguous, shifting and contested, and that individuals in these groups are not considered as having a homogenous experience. I use the following categories:

- Minority ethnic “as this is currently the way in which racialised discourses related to immigrants and their descendents are reflected in policy texts and in much of the research in this area” (Maguire et al, 2006: 87).
- White: for the majority group in UK with pinkish skin
- Asians: for people with heritage from the Indian subcontinent
- Black: for people of African origin. If I know their origin, I tend to use African Caribbean or African.

<sup>II</sup> See articles such as Hirsch, A. (2010) Election 2010: If Britain really is post-racial, why is the election so white? *The Guardian*, 27<sup>th</sup> April; Sharpton, A. (2010) Obama and the messiah complexity. *The Guardian*, 21<sup>st</sup> January.

<sup>III</sup> 12-13 years old.