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## **Abstract**

There has been much debate around the extent to which poststructuralist theory can be applied to critical research. In this article, it is argued that aspects of the two approaches can be combined, resulting in productive tensions that point towards a possible new framework for researching race and racism in education in the UK. The article specifically considers combining Critical Race Theory (CRT), with a poststructural approach to understanding identity based on the work of Judith Butler, and explores the usefulness of such a theoretical approach to investigate minority ethnic young people's experiences of education and the way in which these experiences shape their sense of self, leading to the perpetuation of racial inequalities. It is argued that working at the boundary of these two theoretical traditions provides a deeper understanding of the way in which racism operates, the way it shapes experience, and the possibilities for political and social change.

**Keywords:** Racism; education; Critical Race Theory; poststructural theory; Judith Butler.

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**Why do we need a new framework for researching race in education?**

Although much research on racism in education in the UK has been informed by notions of structural discrimination, it has lacked an explicit theory of structural discrimination (Stevens 2007). Critics in both the UK and the US have suggested that studies in education tend to have been merely descriptive of racism and have not critically theorised issues of inequality (Lynn and Parker 2006; Stevens 2007). Significant debate was generated around a UK study by Foster (1990), who claimed that without clear ‘proof’ that schools are racist and that this racism impacts on the educational outcomes of certain ethnic groups, the findings of studies of racism in schools meant little. There is also ongoing resistance in the field of education research in the UK to the centring of race as a category of analysis<sup>1</sup>. Despite growing evidence that racial inequalities persist (e.g. Gillborn 2006b), it tends to be argued that class is the main determiner of educational experience in the UK<sup>2</sup>. In order to address this gap in education research in the UK, many researchers, (e.g. Gillborn 2005, 2006a, 2006b, 2008 and Parker and Roberts 2005) have started conducting work informed by Critical Race Theory (CRT), which was initially developed in the US. Critical race theorists consider racism to be a form of structural discrimination that permeates all aspects of society. If applied to processes of schooling in the UK, it may provide an explicit structural framework for investigating racism.

Several studies have been carried out over the last 25 years in the UK that consider the impact of racism on minority ethnic young people’s sense of self. These studies tend to fall into one of two groups: the first, those that take a view of identity as relatively fixed and stable, and the second, which take a broadly poststructural view of identity as more complex and shifting. The studies in the first group seem to have, perhaps unintentionally, succeeded in essentialising ethnic identities, even while attempting to challenge stereotypes. Frequently,

the reason for this seems to be a lack of theorising about the production or performativity of identities, which can imply an unrealistic homogeneity within ethnic groups, or suggest binaries, which may create implied ethnic hierarchies or fixed difference between groups. Such an understanding of identity presupposes a fixed essence in each individual, which is frequently linked to race. This notion of fixed difference underpins racist discourses. Poststructural theories on the other hand, tend to understand identities as complex, shifting, multiple and contradictory, which explicitly challenges fixed categorisations of racial difference (Alexander and Knowles 2005).

This article considers the possibility of developing a framework for analysis, which is informed by insights from both critical race theory and the work of poststructural theorist, Judith Butler, in order to provide a deeper understanding of the way in which racism operates and shapes real lives and subjectivities.

### **Working at the boundary between structural and poststructural theories**

The possibilities of combining structural and poststructural theories has been the source of ongoing debate, especially among feminists (e.g. Francis 1999; St Pierre 2000), but also, if to a lesser extent, among race theorists (e.g. Hurtado 2003; Wright 2003). Structural and poststructural theories are often thought to be antagonistic to each other (Peters 2001). This is mainly because much structuralist theory is thought to focus on master narratives to theorise society, while poststructuralism is thought 'to focus upon the fragmentary, the incompleteness, the local, the indeterminate' (Peters 2001, 7). However, others have argued that the two theoretical traditions have much in common: For example, both can be used to present challenges to hegemonic power (Pillow 2007; Koch 2007). They also both challenge the notion of the autonomous subject (Peters and Burbules 2004). Indeed, the two theoretical positions have a complex relationship, and I argue that they can expand each other if used in

pursuit of a common political goal: to enhance our understanding of the way in which structures of oppression operate, and the way these structures shape realities.

Structuralism and poststructuralism are very complex and each tends to refer to a range of theoretical positions. It is beyond the remit of this article to give an overview of the approaches, rather I attempt to develop specific understandings of each. In some ways, poststructuralist thinking can be seen as building on some of the insights of structuralism (Weedon 1997; Haber 2004), and it is this relationship of 'building upon' which is most important when considering how insights from Judith Butler's work can enhance CRT. For example, the structuralist theorist Saussure argued that language constitutes reality rather than reflecting it, as was previously believed. Poststructuralism builds on this, by arguing that this discursively constituted reality can be plural, and have conflicting and shifting meanings. Consequently, language and meaning are open to challenge and redefinition, which opens up the possibility for social change (Weedon 1997). Poststructuralism challenges notions of absolute truth, final interpretation, universal structures, unambiguous definitions and dichotomies and promotes notions of plurality, difference and anti-essentialism (Peters and Burbules 2004). Moreover, poststructuralism builds on the structuralist notion that power relations structure society. However, it allows power to be understood as productive and positive (Peters 2001) - rather than just oppressive, as tends to be the case in structural theories. Like structural theories, poststructural perspectives assume that subjectivity is constructed rather than innate, and is viewed as historically and socially specific. However, rather than viewing the subject as unified and fixed, poststructuralism decentres the subject, by which is meant that it theorises subjectivity as influenced by several competing discourses and therefore as contradictory and shifting (Weedon 1997).

Many criticisms have been levelled against poststructuralism. Key to combining insights from both structural and poststructural theories is a specific understanding of

poststructural theory as political and containing the potential for change. Firstly, the charge of excessive relativism has been made (e.g. McLaren 2003). As an approach that is suspicious of truths and fixed conclusions, poststructuralism is seen to tend towards nihilism. However, a more political understanding of poststructuralism suggests it gives us the tools to deconstruct hegemonic systems of belief that have been used to oppress certain groups, and can demonstrate that hegemonies are socially constructed. This understanding opens up possibilities for alternative ways of thinking- indeed far from being nihilistic, it simply means that there are many realities – which does not mean that all claims to truth are considered equal (St Pierre 2000; Koch 2007). Moreover, as with structuralist theories, space is made for marginalised stories to be heard, and hegemonic discourses to be challenged.

Secondly, it is argued that some readings of poststructuralism remove the basis for political action (Haber 1994). Its refusal of fixed notions of identity and authentic voice is sometimes regarded as another attempt to deny marginalised groups their common voices, identities and histories (Pillow 2007), which are often promoted by oppressed groups as a tool of empowerment and to counter ‘othering’ discourses (e.g. Delgado Bernal 2002). As Haber (1994) points out, this argument seems to presume that a recognition of similarity precludes difference, and that a recognition of difference precludes political collaboration on the basis of some kind of unity. This is a false dichotomy. Difference need not be understood as universal: recognising difference does not deny similarity and equally, ‘all structures and all community relations are plural and subject to redescription’ (Haber 1994, 115).

Poststructuralism can be read as providing a completely new way of political thinking rather than simply reflecting what has gone before. Koch (2007) explains that poststructuralism opens up an opportunity to imagine other alternatives rather than simply answering a dominant ‘truth’ with a counter ‘truth’. The type of political intervention that this understanding of poststructural theory can offer is important because it provides a way of

valuing difference, diversity and plurality and therefore offers us a basis for radical democracy (Mouffe 1993), which provides a real alternative to oppressive structures:

The new political struggle that emerges with poststructuralism is one that opposes the system of discipline linked to the representation of human identity. It is the act of representing, the creation of categories and closed systems of characteristics that makes totalitarian systems possible. Only after this technology of power has been implemented can the public become cogs in the network of oppression. (Koch 2007, 15)

As Koch argues above, by refusing fixed categories of identity, the basis of systems of oppression that can lead to the collapse of democracy, such as fascism, is denied. Butler (2004) writes that poststructuralism points forward to the possibility of a 'more culturally complex and hybrid world' (p. 231), which involves extending 'the norms that sustain viable life to previously disenfranchised communities' (p. 225). In addition, the decentring of the subject can be read as opening up subjectivity to the possibility of change and re-constitution, due to the wide range of discourses that constitute it (Butler 2004, 2010). This notion of a radically democratic way of being, which accommodates difference is a potential we should work towards (Mouffe 1993; Peters and Burbules 2004), without forgetting the oppressive structures that form much of reality. In addition, much poststructural theory explicitly advocates political change, such as queer theory. It is thus useful to emphasise this transformatory aspect when employing poststructural theory as a tool in social justice research, an aspect that indeed builds upon critical theory, which itself frequently promotes an explicit call to action.

A further criticism is that poststructural approaches undertheorise the reality of the impact of master narratives on individual lives and identities (Ang-Lygate 1997; Weedon 1997; Ladson-Billings 1998). On this aspect also, it could be useful to combine aspects of



poststructuralism with critical theory, in order to address the lived experiences of oppressed groups. Indeed, society cannot be understood without an analysis of master narratives, which do, to a certain extent, shape perceptions and interaction.

There are those who argue that poststructuralism is epistemologically racist because it evolved in racist societies and from an ethnocentric tradition that excluded ethnic minorities (Scheurich and Young 1997). While this cannot be denied in many ways, it can equally be argued that scholars of various ethnicities draw on poststructural theories to inform their work, and expand it to address issues of race (e.g. scholars whose work appears in Mirza's 1997 collection, 'Black British Feminism'). While tensions and contradictions therefore remain in such a project that combines insights from such distinct theories, rather than dismissing poststructural work, the ideas and goals can still be very valuable for work on race.

Drawing on aspects of both theoretical approaches allows us to work towards developing a theory of social interaction with explicitly political social justice aims based on the experiences of marginalised groups without being essentialist, which values diversity and complexity. In order to work towards developing a framework to deepen our understanding of the way racism in education shapes the experiences and subjectivities of minority ethnic students, I suggest drawing on aspects of CRT and Judith Butler (1990, 1993, 1997, 2004b), whose work on subjectivities and performativity potentially provides a theory for exploring the production of identities at the same time as explicitly challenging identity categories.

### **Critical Race Theory**

CRT emerged in the US as a response to a movement called Critical Legal Studies (CLS), which critiqued the liberal discourse of Civil Rights (Ladson-Billings 1998) and the alleged

objectivism of the legal system. The CLS movement was informed by Gramsci's notion of hegemony, a strategy through which the state maintains its power by gaining the consent of all groups in society to its domination, including subordinate groups (Tate 1997). Critical race theorists extended the critique of CLS to race, arguing that CLS needed to specifically theorise racism (Tate 1997; Yosso 2002; Lynn and Parker 2006), as white people had been the primary beneficiaries of civil rights legislation and African Americans continued to be systematically disadvantaged in US society (Ladson-Billings 1998). Although it started in Legal Studies, CRT has spread to other disciplines, and since 1995 it has been used in the field of education in the US by Tate and Ladson-Billings.

CRT, then, emerged from a specific historical context in the US, and therefore cannot be appropriated unproblematically to the UK context (see e.g. Cole 2009). Indeed, there are those who argue that CRT is so embedded in the US experience that it is an unsuitable framework for the UK, due to the very different racial, cultural and historical context (e.g. Rizvi 2009). Insights from CRT, however, can be used to address the question of why racism persists in education in the UK context. At the time of writing it has made significant inroads into educational research in the UK, most notably in the work of Gillborn (2005, 2006b, 2006c, 2008).

### ***Tenets***

As CRT is used in different fields in slightly different ways and is constantly developing, there is no specific set of rules or doctrines to which all CRT scholars subscribe (Ladson-Billings 1998). Below, I outline the tenets that appear to be particularly applicable to researching race in education in the UK, based mainly on the work of Delgado (1995), Tate (1997), Ladson-Billings (1998), Lynn (1999, 2002), Duncan (2002), Delgado Bernal (2002),

Solorzano and Yosso (2002), DeCuir and Dixson (2004), Gillborn (2006b, 2008), Lynn and Parker (2006), Leonardo (2009).

- CRT foregrounds race and racism as a central aspect of analysis ‘as a structure and discourse which shapes the interaction’ (Duncan 2002, 87) referred to as white supremacy.<sup>3</sup>
- CRT views racism as so deeply engrained in society that it is considered normal, and thus frequently goes unnoticed by dominant groups, and sometimes also by the oppressed. Racial discrimination can be both witting and unwitting.
- CRT has a strong commitment to political activism and its overall goal is the eradication of racism as part of the wider objective to eliminate all forms of oppression.
- It challenges dominant liberal approaches, including neutrality, objectivity, meritocracy and universality.
- CRT analyses social interaction and policy in its social, historical and political context in order to render especially covert racism visible.

### ***CRT in education***

CRT in education provides an important contribution to the debate around how wider social inequalities are produced and reproduced by the school system, focusing specifically on

racial inequalities. CRT does not offer a 'new' critique of school reproduction. Critics have already established that schools reproduce market place relations, concerning issues such as class and gender relations (Bourdieu 1990; Willis 1977; Bowles and Gintis 1976; Durkheim 2006). Rather, these existing critiques are drawn upon to produce a more comprehensive challenge to structures and discourses that specifically marginalise ethnic minority students (Yosso 2002; Knaus 2009).

In a CRT analytical framework, white supremacy is a given. The question is not whether white supremacy can be identified, but how it is manifested. The education system is understood as shaped by white supremacy, which defines roles, identities, interaction and policy. Minority ethnic identities are defined as 'other' against an assumed white norm. A CRT view provides a direct challenge to dominant discourses that hold that the school system is essentially a fair and racially equal system (Ladson-Billings 1998; Lynn and Parker 2006), to which minority ethnic students present a problem or a threat, and holds that the situation of ethnic minorities in schools is rather a manifestation of an intrinsically racist society (Duncan 2002). The notion that such a system can provide equality for all presumes that an equal society already exists, which is nonsense in societies where different groups have been treated differently historically and where white supremacy continues to function as a dominant discourse (Tate 1997). Thus CRT argues that racism is actually reproduced by a system that is assumed to apply fairly to all (Gillborn 2006b, c; Leonardo 2009).

CRT unmask frequently covert structures of racial oppression by analysing the education system in the context of the historical, social and economic effects of white supremacy (Lynn 2002; Leonardo 2009). For example, black students are still over-represented in expulsions from school in the UK (Gillborn 2006b): in 2004/5 black and mixed heritage students were twice as likely to be permanently excluded from school than their white counterparts (DfES 2006). This recognition is not new, and the disproportionate

numbers of black students excluded is not hidden. Rather what *is* hidden are the racist structures that account for this: a CRT approach would contextualise the situation by exploring it in relation to historic images of black children in UK schools, where they have been considered badly behaved, over-lively, emotionally difficult, educationally less capable than white children and threatening to classroom order (Blair 2000). It would also examine images that have been constructed in the everyday discourses around black male youths. It would link the high levels of expulsions to the historical representations of black youth as threatening the social order of Britain, by their perceived unbritishness and alleged essential links to crime and violence that influence teachers' perceptions of them. 'The essential "*criminality*" of black people and of black males [is] reproduced and re-inforced in the social psyche' (Blair 2000, 164 original italics). This perceived essential nature is used to justify the surveillance and harsher punishments of black pupils by teachers and their over-representation in school expulsions.

Thus CRT as an analytical tool is especially effective for 'uncovering the often hidden subtext of race in society' (Parker and Lynn 2002, 10). In the UK, despite increasing evidence to suggest that 'institutional racism is a characteristic of the English education system' (Gillborn 2006a, 90), race is rarely mentioned in educational policy (Tomlinson 2005). Inequalities in educational experience are not officially recognised as a racist issue.

CRT provides a tool to render visible forms of covert racism, which can involve 'incessant... cumulative... microaggressions' (Lynn and Parker 2006, 260), including everyday actions and continual 'othering'. This type of racism tends to consist of small things that build up, and often involves slightly differential treatment. Whilst some behaviours or incidents might not be recognised as specifically racist, they can 'call up longstanding stereotypes' (Ikemoto 1995, 309) and consequently be viewed as racist or impact disproportionately on minority ethnic groups. It might involve low teacher

expectations at school, or being spoken to in a patronising way. These are examples of treatment, which on the one hand, could be explained away as insignificant, or perhaps due to other factors, but which build up and have a cumulative effect on the lives of minority ethnic individuals. Student responses to such covert racism, including different forms of resistance, underachievement and self-exclusion are understood in this context.

CRT also examines the way in which white supremacy is maintained and enacted in education, by analysing the stories that white teachers tell about race and difference as a way of sustaining racial privilege (Picower 2009). A critical race analysis renders visible the links between educational underachievement among particular ethnic groups and the negative way in which they are perceived by many teachers, rather than, for instance, placing the blame at the feet of the individual, their family, or their whole (perceived) community. For example, black students as well as students of Pakistani and Bangladeshi origin continue to score below the national average in the GCSE examinations that mark the end of compulsory schooling in England (DfES 2006). A critical race analysis takes into account that these children are consistently entered for lower papers in these exams by their teachers, meaning that even if they attain the highest possible mark on these papers, they will never gain university entrance (Gillborn 2006a, 90). In effect, such a system denies children entered for lower papers the chance to go to university.

A CRT reading of the school curriculum reveals that while appearing to be value-free, it can be understood as an 'act of white supremacy' (Gillborn 2005; Leonardo 2009), legitimating the racist structures in society, excluding counter discourses to dominant white supremacist ones, and creating a notion of nationhood that excludes minority ethnic groups. This can equally be applied to the US, or the centralised English National Curriculum. Some critical race theorists have started working towards developing possible critical race curricula based on the some of the main tenets, which would value minority ethnic voices and

experiences and have an explicitly political, social justice agenda (e.g. Yosso 2002; Katsarou 2009).

CRT can therefore be used as a research tool to reveal the (mostly invisible) racialising function of seemingly deracialised discourses in education, such as difference, threat, order, which shape social interaction in schools and perpetuate racial inequalities. It provides a context for the study of racial inequalities in schools by locating it within wider structures of white supremacy in society, and offers suggestions for political transformation. It is particularly useful to counter neo-liberal policies or claims that we are moving towards a post-racial era in which race no longer matters (Stovall et al 2009). However, when considering how these discourses actually impact on young people's realities and subjectivities, it could be argued that CRT is limited because in many cases it seems to essentialise identities.

### **Theorising identities**

CRT illustrates the essentialising effects of fixed, racialising discourses on individual subjectivities. However, this process remains undertheorised, which tends to mask the complexity of identities (Carbado and Gulati 2003). It could be argued that much work by critical race theorists implicitly essentialises identities by portraying identity as fixed and reproducing notions of fixed cultural difference. There seem to be two main reasons for this: Firstly, the strategic mobilisation of essentialised identities for political reasons, which is an important part of CRT, is rarely theorised explicitly; and secondly, to date, CRT has examined little about the production or performativity of identities. Although there is an awareness of shifting and fluid identities in CRT, and some CRT is implicitly underpinned by a notion of race as socially constructed, still little work has been done in this area (Lynn and Parker 2006), particularly in education, with the exception of a small body of work (e.g.

Leonardo 2009). Only a small number of critical race theorists in Legal Studies have theorised the performativity of race (Carbado and Gulati 2003; Rich 2004). Moreover, if CRT is to be useful in contexts beyond the US, the notion of identity as expressed by critical race theorists needs to be complicated.

Despite having been extended to analyse the experiences of different ethnic and cultural groups besides African Americans, it could still be argued that most critical race theorists treat racial, ethnic or cultural groups as almost natural categories, implying homogeneity within groups, difference between groups, and a fixidity to culture. There are those who argue that although the first generation of critical race theorists could be criticised for essentialising identities because they needed to focus on the subjugated voices of ethnic minorities (Tate 1997; Sleeter and Delgado Bernal 2004; Lynn and Parker 2006), the second generation have taken these ideas and extended them, thus can no longer be accused of essentialisation. The second generation show the interaction of racism with other forms of domination, including gender and class (Delgado Bernal 2002; Ladson-Billings and Donner 2005). Equally, the theory has been adapted by different ethnic groups and extended to address racism 'beyond the Black/White binary' (Yosso 2002, 95), such as the racism faced by people of Chinese, Latino or indigenous American origin. However, it could be argued that much of this work still seems to essentialise identities by focusing on cultural difference and setting up binaries between ethnic groups and cultures by neglecting to theorise the production of identities.

There are exceptions to this: Some critical race theorists (Lynn 2006; Leonardo 2009) discuss strategic essentialism, explicitly theorising the way in which people lay claim to essentialised group identities for political reasons, and taking into account the way these oppositional identities are often lived as real, in which individuals have invested much meaning,



[if] any correlation of colour to social experience and, hence, to social understanding, viewpoint, or conscience (is rejected)...racial-ethnic diversity can mean nothing (Valdes et al 2002, 3)

However, strategic essentialism tends to remain undertheorised, and much CRT implicitly links racial identities to authentic notions of voice and unique consciousness, and reductionist notions of experience.

... [T]he time is here for 'black' identity to be... unmasked as only a useful strategy but no more. As a form of strategic essentialism that has the power to mobilise people, it is nevertheless a strategy not to be confused with substantive essentialism that stifles expressions of plurality (Ang-Lygate 1997, 182)

Whilst a key strength of CRT is to illustrate the potency of the master narrative of white supremacy in constituting identities, it does not tend to consider how people came to be located in racialised spaces, and despite the fact that some theorists claim to do so, does not tend to theorise heterogeneity, and thus creates further dichotomies. In order to establish differences between identity categories, differences within them tend to be underplayed (Aziz 1997).

The fixing of notions of culture, race or gender into frozen, unchanging stereotypes, firstly denies 'the complex formations of lived identities' (Alexander 2004, 526); secondly, underestimates differences between people; thirdly, views ethnicity as the main marker of a (minority ethnic) individual's identity at the expense of other identifications such as location, class, generation and biography and; fourthly, the concept of 'natural' group identity inadvertently supports racist discourses that essentialise and homogenise people (Ladson-

Billings and Donner 2005) and that underpin discourses of cultural incompatibility (Alexander 2004).

Work still remains to be done, therefore, around the theorising of identities in CRT. To be useful for analysing the experiences in UK schools, a theory of identity is needed that can take into account the wide diversity, complexity, shifting and sometimes contradictory nature of identities in Britain today. Poststructural theories potentially provide a way of theorising the complexity and performativity of identities.

### **Poststructural notions of identity**

Poststructural notions of race are anti-essentialist, and have tended to be rejected by some critical race theorists because it is seen as meaning a rejecting the concept of race altogether (Carbado and Gulati 2003). Several theorists emphasise how anti-essentialism can trivialise or delegitimize people's common experiences of oppression (MacKinnon 2002; Ladson-Billings and Donner 2005). Valdes et al (2002) warn against anti-essentialism without combining it with a theory of subordination. I do not argue for an apolitical anti-essentialism that disregards collective political mobilisation. A critique of essentialised notions of identity does not necessarily lead to the rejection of any concept of identity at all. Rather I argue in favour of a theory, which on the one hand takes into account the reality of people's identifications with different group identities, experiences of oppression and essentialised subjectivities as a result of the structures of oppression, and on the other, a theory that explicitly theorises the production and performativity of identities, recognising the complexity and fluidity of identity and strategic essentialism as a form of political resistance. By abandoning the view of a unified or homogenous subject with a central 'essence', we can theorise the diversity of discourses that shape and subordinate the subject (Mouffe 1993). As Butler (1990) argues, '[t]he deconstruction of identity is not the deconstruction of politics;

rather it establishes as political the very terms through which identity is articulated' (p. 203).

Insights from poststructuralist understandings of identity offer one way of theorising the complexity of subjectivity.

Those race theorists whose work is underpinned by a poststructuralist understanding of identity demonstrate that such an approach allows us to theorise the ways in which identities are produced by power. Particularly when employed with an analysis of white supremacy, poststructural analyses can theorise experiences of oppression. For example, Ringrose's (2002) work on whiteness shows that a fluid notion of identities does not preclude an understanding of identities that are perceived as essential, rather it explicitly theorises how and why these are produced or experienced. Critical race theorist Ikemoto (1995) demonstrates how racial tags have political meanings, but these meanings and positionings are complex and shifting. She shows how people position themselves as black, white, different, according to the situation – both the immediate and the political, and thus illustrates the fluidity and dynamism of racial positioning. Carbado and Gulati (2003) explore the way race is negotiated, presented, projected and interpreted in the work place on a daily basis, and how the way in which an individual performs a racial identity affects the extent to which she suffers discrimination. Bhattacharyya et al (2002) explore the way in which national and global racial categories shift, changing the way in which people of different phenotype are positioned and can position themselves. However, examples of race theorists whose analysis is underpinned with a poststructural understanding of identities remain rare in the field of education. I argue that the poststructural theorist Judith Butler provides a theoretical framework that both avoids essentialising identities and yet explicitly theorises the way they are shaped through power.

**Judith Butler and the production of identities**

Judith Butler's (1993, 1997, 2004b) work theorises the process through which identities are shaped. Although Butler tends to be best known for her work on gender, she has more recently applied some of her identity theories to race as well (Butler 2004a, 2010). Other writers have also started applying her theory to race (e.g. Rich 2004; Youdell 2006; Nayak 2006).

Butler argues that identity categories do not reflect or describe (pre-existing) subjects as is widely believed, they produce them. Importantly for work on race, an individual is rendered a subject through discourse. Such approaches challenge the liberal humanist belief that the subject is the author of the discourse she speaks (Weedon 1997). Viewed as discursively constituted, identities are not considered to be an essential essence coming from within an individual, but are negotiated reactions to social norms coming from without and are therefore historically and socially situated. This explicitly contests the notion that there is a single, unified essence of self:

[T]he terms that make up one's gender are, from the start, outside oneself, beyond oneself in a sociality that has no single author. (Butler 2004, 1)

It suggests that individuals tend to behave as they have been constituted and therefore, can only be given limited responsibility for their situation, actions and identity, which are seen as being shaped by power and discourse. This has massive implications for understanding oppression, challenging neo-conservative notions that individuals can be held responsible for their own, sustained subordinated status:

If a subject can be shown to pursue or sustain his or her subordinated status, the reasoning goes, then perhaps final responsibility for that subordination resides with the subject. Over and against

this view, I would maintain that the attachment to subjection is produced by the workings of power...the subject is the effect of power in recoil. (Butler 1997, 6)

Butler rejects all identity categories, as the subject is seen as fully socially constructed. Identities are understood as the effects of institutions, practices and discourses, they are entirely socially shaped and produced. The subject does not pre-exist its subjectivation, thus there can be no essential, stable or unified subject. Categories such as race and gender are not actually fixed to bodies, they are just perceived as being so.

Whilst the subject is constituted and constrained by subjectivation, she is not wholly determined. Although she is dependent, she also has a certain agency created at the moment of subjectivation (Butler 1997). This is not a sovereign agency, rather the subject has discursive agency: agency within the limits of her subjection. This allows for a more complex understanding of resistance to dominant discourses, and the conditions under which resistance is possible, and indeed, that resistance may not necessarily be conscious or explicit, a factor that tends to be undertheorised in CRT. This notion therefore does not challenge the structural theory that master narratives such as white supremacy define societal relations to a large extent, but it extends and complicates it.

### ***Performativity***

Butler (1993, 1997, 2004b) argues that the constitution of identities functions on a day to day basis through a practice she calls performativity. By this she means that gender, race and other identities are something we 'do', not that we are, and we act these out, perform them, often unwittingly, in different ways in different situations. The word 'performativity' should suggest neither insincere nor necessarily conscious actions: No identity is considered more 'real' than another; they are shifting, multiple, sometimes contradictory. Performativity can

be described as ‘the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effect that it names’ (Butler 1993, 2). Individuals perform certain norms, and it is these repeat performances, these constant imitations, which construct and confirm the norms. Individuals do not only perform their own identities, they perform identities onto others and they negotiate (possibly contradictory) identities that are performed onto them. The potential instability of the fixity of ‘race’ to bodies presumed by Butler is, I would argue, inherent in understanding the ways in which CRT comprehends the significance of white supremacy in making oppressive racial identifications, such as micro-aggressions, described above. The fixity of race requires the everyday and perpetual exercise of white supremacy.

The notion that identities are performatively and discursively constituted presents a challenge to ‘authentic’ identities, as discourses are interpreted and situated in varied and contradictory ways (Noble 2005). It also challenges the notion that identity can be linked in any essential way to race (or any other way of identifying) and makes explicit that it is this performative repetition that makes it seem as though characteristics are naturally linked to identity categories. In addition notions of performativity explain how and why oppressed subjects are often complicit in their own oppression (Barvosa-Carter 2005) – as most individuals will perform as expected, shaped, as they are, by discourse. An understanding of performativity, then, allows a more complex theorisation of identity production that could usefully extend CRT.

### ***Judith Butler and race***

Butler’s more recent work provides an example of an application of her theories to race (Butler 2004a, 2010), providing an analysis of the way race and is produced and reproduced as race becomes perceived as ‘fixed’ to bodies. She explores how lives and bodies are

understood, or 'recognised', through racial 'frames'. A 'frame' in Butlerian terms is a collection of discourses that shapes perception. She argues that some bodies will be 'recognised' as not having the same entitlement to rights as others. She applies this framework to the counter terrorism agenda of the US, arguing that racial frames mean non-white people are 'recognised' as threatening, which is seen to justify an automatic suspicion:

If a person is simply deemed dangerous, then it is no longer a matter of deciding whether criminal acts occurred (Butler 2004a, 76)

The notion of racial frames offers a way of understanding the paradox of race: how race is a social and discursive construction, yet is perceived (and thus mostly lived and experienced) as an essential aspect of identity.

A small number of race theorists in fields besides education have demonstrated the usefulness of a Butlerian framework in theorising the complexities of race, although this has not been widely taken up. Both Rich (2004) in the US and Nayak (2006) in the UK employ Butler's tools to argue explicitly that there is no essential identity behind expressions of identity. Their work shows that an understanding of race as performative helps theorise racial expression such as dress, accent, manner of walking or political stance – on the basis of which discrimination is frequent - as neither linked to phenotype, nor necessarily voluntary; however it is paradoxically perceived as both.

Youdell's work (2006) on race provides a rare example of how Butler's thinking can be applied in an education context. She shows how Butler's theoretical tools can help researchers explore moments in which subjects are constituted and identify the subjectivating effects of unspoken racial discourses, arguing that this helps us understand how some students are rendered subjects within student-hood, and some without. In her example, she investigates how young men of Arab origin at an Australian school are constituted as subjects

by implicit discourses of Orientalism and terrorism. Although the boys' resistance to white, western hegemony is described by Youdell as 'a playful skirmish' (p522), their behaviour seen as threatening by white staff. Youdell argues that the boys' behaviour is taken so seriously because it calls up the threat of terror in this specific context. Thus teacher and students act as they are constituted by discourse, the staff response in this context is seen not as racist, but as necessary. However, at this moment, the young men are constituted as threatening to studenthood.

Butler's work can be seen as providing an exploration of the relationship between the discursive and the material, and in doing so, offers a valuable extension of CRT. It could, however, be argued that Butler focuses too much on the discursive, and not enough on the material. A CRT analysis of white supremacy, employed in conjunction with insights from Butlers' work, would provide the explicit material, racial context when employing these frameworks to analyse race in education.

### **Moving towards a new framework for researching race in education**

An analytical framework consisting of insights from both CRT and the work of Judith Butler has the potential to provide a toolkit for exploring the implications of white supremacy in education. In this framework, white supremacy is a given. In addressing the issue of covert and unwitting racism, it challenges notions that explicit 'proof' of racism is needed to argue that racism plays a role in social interaction. Rather than viewing race as an independent variable, it is seen as shaping, and shaped by, institutional dynamics in a dialectic process.

Notions of performativity open up new spaces for considering the ways in which discourses with a racist subtext shape the subjectivities, perceptions, interaction and realities of students and teachers, without essentialising or fixing identity or culture. As Rich (2004) argues, the notion of race as a performative takes into account differences within categories,



explains variations in behaviours, explores varying reasons for different racial identifications. The framework theorises the way in which individuals are constituted as different kinds of beings: black or white, troublemaker or good student; at once both exploring and challenging these categories. It allows us to understand the way in which shifting policy and media discourses are performed onto teachers and students, and can be used to explore the way in which individuals negotiate their identities in relation to these discourses, without underestimating the strength and impact of racial oppression. It prevents us taking for granted what we think we know in education: a student is so, or acts as such, because she has been designated so.

### **Transformatory possibilities?**

This framework is intended for interpretation and analysis rather than explicitly for action, which may be regarded by some as a limitation. However, transformatory notions are contained in Butler's work. Like other poststructural theorists whose work is political, Butler's work goes beyond, but also includes more traditional notions of political action. Critical theory tends to be underpinned by the idea that individuals must organise collectively for political transformation to be effective. Whilst Butler does not dispute the importance of collective action, she does argue that this should not be on the basis of an essentialised subject. Rather, her work opens up opportunities for new coalitions and alliances (2010) and an understanding of the diversity of ways in which oppression, based on identity categories, can function.

An understanding of the subject as produced by discourse means that hegemonic meanings can be unsettled, as these discourses can potentially be interrupted. This has significant implications for education: if the student were designated differently, she would be different. The challenge is 'to constitute students *again differently*' (Youdell 2006, 519

original italics). Research on race can contribute to this, through working with an understanding of the subject as fragmented and plural, and constructed along multiple axes of identity. This view of the subject disrupts the perceived essential links between racial categories and phenotype, as identity categories are understood as performative and political. This destabiling of identity categories has the potential to disrupt notions of 'difference' as natural and neutral, so often found in educational settings and research.

### **Conclusion**

Working at the boundary between critical and poststructural theories is fraught with tensions and incompatibilities. These tensions should not be diminished, nor the diverse natures of these theories denied. However, the new spaces that are opened up by such work should be regarded as productive rather than debilitating. This contribution has explored some of the possibilities for interaction between theories. The poststructural theory deployed in this article does not displace structural theories, rather the two approaches run alongside each other (Wright 2003), extend each other and also overlap. Lather (2006) argues that 'research that attends to issues of power can go across paradigms' (p.50), and indeed, this framework is explicit about its social justice aims. This cross-paradigm (Lather 2006) framework provides just one suggestion for working towards a social justice analysis of the school experiences of minority ethnic young people. Some may feel that as Butler's work does not provide an explicit and comprehensive analysis of race, it is unsuitable. However, this overtly political and materialist reading of Butler's work, combined with insights from CRT, does allow the debate around race in educational research to become more complex - particularly important since the counter terror agenda and neo-liberal policies currently pursued by western governments are likely to further polarise identity categories and widen racial inequalities.

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<sup>1</sup> Despite the official acknowledgement of structural and possibly unwitting racism in the term ‘institutional racism’, which identified covert racism in the police force in 1999, racism in the UK still tends to be understood in terms of extreme, violent acts, or the openly racist rhetoric of the British National Party or Neo-nazi groups (Moschel 2007).

<sup>2</sup> The audience at the first symposium on CRT at the British Education Research Association’s (BERA) Annual Conference, ‘Guess who’s coming to BERA this year?’ (2007) insisted that class rather than race determined experiences in education.

<sup>3</sup> The term ‘white supremacy’ is seen to emphasise the way in which racial ‘othering’ functions as a master narrative which disadvantages ethnic minorities and upholds the privileges of white people by influencing attitudes, policy and interaction. This explains how racism does not only describe extreme, violent acts or the openly racist rhetoric of groups such as the British National Party (although this should also be taken seriously) but can also be structural or unwitting. The term white supremacy therefore does not refer to skin colour, rather to structures of subordination and domination.