Proceedings

of the 2006 Joint Conference of the APS and NZPsS

26 – 30 September 2006, Auckland, NZ

Psychology Bridging the Tasman: Science, Culture and Practice

Editor: Dr Mary Katsikitis

ISBN 0-909881-30-8

Publisher
The Australian Psychological Society Ltd
Level 11, 257 Collins Street, Melbourne, Victoria 3000 Australia
Email: proceedings@psychology.org.au
Editor’s Note and Acknowledgements

I am very pleased to present the Proceedings of the 2006 Joint Conference of the Australian Psychological Society (APS) and the New Zealand Psychological Society (NZPsS), 26 – 30 September 2006.

Thank you to all contributors for submitting excellent papers, bridging the Tasman, and across the broad discipline of psychology.

I would also like to take this opportunity to thank the reviewers from the APS Division of Research and Teaching (DRAT), and from the membership of the NZPsS. All papers were subject to an independent blind, peer review process.

The Proceedings will be published in 2006 and be available at the Joint Conference of the APS and NZPsS in Auckland.

Special thanks to Jo Howard and Zena Roslan, who assisted in all aspects of this process, including providing advice for the authors on formatting and editing of their papers, and keeping us all to the tight deadlines necessary in an endeavour such as this.

Dr Mary Katsikitis
Manager, Science and Education,
Australian Psychological Society

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Psychology and Anti-Racism: Understanding the Melancholic White Subject

Damien W. Riggs (damien.riggs@adelaide.edu.au)
School of Psychology
University of Adelaide, South Australia 5005 Australia

Abstract

This paper elaborates one particular limitation of white anti-racist practice as it is framed within the discipline of psychology. In contrast to an individualised focus on ‘bad racists’, this paper proposes that there is a pressing need for those of us who identify as white to examine the formative ways in which racism shapes the lives of all people living in colonial nations such as Australia. In bringing psychoanalytic and critical psychological concepts to bear upon an analysis of racism and racial privilege in Australia, it is proposed that white identities in Australia may be understood as thoroughly social practices that are constituted through melancholic forms of identification. Yet, as will be highlighted, such melancholia is disavowed through the ways in which historical events are constructed in white narratives of belonging. In order to engage in a reflexive anti-racist practice within the discipline of psychology, it is proposed that further examination is required in regards to what such melancholia signifies in relation to white subjectivities. This may entail a focus on the relationship between white claims to belonging and the sovereignties of Indigenous people, rather than continuing to compare ‘good anti-racists’ with ‘bad racists’.

Introduction

Discussions of racism within the mainstream of psychology are, on the whole, marked by their focus on either social or individual causes. In contrast, critical psychological approaches have sought to examine how it is that racism is productive of a range of racialised subject positions, with a particular focus on those of us who benefit from race privilege. This represents an important reversal of the logic of anti-racist practice, as it seeks not to examine how ‘racist people’ enact racism, but rather to explore how a context of racism (which itself is a legacy of ongoing histories of oppression based upon the category of ‘race’) produces subjects who are rendered intelligible only within particular racialised social contexts (Gilroy, 2005). In other words, critical psychological work on racism has sought not to label particular people as ‘racist’, but instead to explore how racism is formative of particular identities (Riggs & Augoustinos, 2005).

My own focus within this paper is on the ways in which those of us who identify as white in Australia live within a relationship to a series of racialised norms that accrue to us particular privileges, and which also position us within a relationship to histories of colonisation and genocide. To refer to someone as ‘white’ is to identify them as occupying a particular location in relation to racialised networks of power. Thus, to refer to someone as white in this instance is not to naively accept that race as a category is useful, nor a biological fact, nor internally coherent. Rather, to speak of race is to acknowledge that the assumption of racialised differences continues to inform how we relate to one another as people, and that this is the legacy of histories of violence that have been perpetuated in the name of imperialism and empire against people classified as racial others. To speak of someone ‘being white’ is thus to unsettle the norm of white privilege – to refuse to allow those of us who identify as white a position of invisibility – to challenge any claims to ‘racelessness’, and to locate white people as benefactors within the discriminatory classificatory system that is ‘race’. To study whiteness is thus to study the complex ways in which white people benefit from white privilege, enshrined as it is within institutions that prioritise the values, behaviours and beliefs of dominant group members (Moreton-Robinson, 2000). Whiteness may thus be understood as a form of cultural capital that, whilst being differentially distributed amongst those variously identified as white, does nonetheless result from the oppression of those people identified as not being white (Fine, 1997).

In the case of Australia, the institutions of whiteness, and the privileges that accrue to white people as a result, come primarily at the expense of Indigenous people: through the genocide of indigenous cultures, the theft of indigenous lands, and the removal of Indigenous children from their families. For those of us who identify as white, then, the enactment of white subjectivities is always already premised upon, and is a direct result of, colonisation. As I shall explicate throughout this paper, I understand subjectivity in the philosophical sense – of how we are brought into being as viable subjects under particular regimes of power, ones that prioritise particular subject positions over others (Butler, 1997). To be a subject in this sense, to be recognised as a knowable entity, is to be always already located in relation to particular norms, and to have incorporated those norms at the very moment of our being identified as subjects.

‘Bad Racists’ vs ‘Good Anti-Racists’

To return to my earlier point about anti-racism, then, it may be useful here to briefly elaborate one of the ways
in which anti-racist practice is typically engaged within the discipline of psychology. By anti-racism I refer to those approaches to critiquing, challenging and deconstructing the endemic racism that exists within colonial nations such as Australia. Such approaches often involve speaking out about how racism oppress certain groups of people, developing ways of challenging racism, and highlighting the ways in which racism is enshrined in institutions such as the law, health care, education and social policy. My concern with the psychological research in this area is not that it does not do enough towards these ends per se, but that it does not sufficiently examine the assumptions that often inform anti-racism, namely, that it can at times slip into ‘helping the other’; that it can be about examining racism against, rather than racism for, and that it can continue to prioritise the agendas of dominant group members.

One example of such anti-racist practice is in the assumption that racism is enacted solely by those white people positioned as ‘bad racists’: people who discriminate against others as a result of ‘intra-psychic prejudice’. Psychological research that takes this assumption as its starting point typically produces two outcomes: first, that (nominally) white academics are implicitly constructed as good anti-racists who can detect ‘bad racists’, and second, that racism is only enacted by individual white people (Riggs & Selby, 2003).

The notion of the ‘bad white racist’ appears in the work of Saxton (2004) who analyses the talk of young white people involved in workshops on reconciliation. Saxton notes that her white participants represent racism:

as isolated individual bigotry rather than the normative ideology of Australian society. By accounting for racism as attitudes that other people have, these participants adopted a neutral position on race issues and provided a contrast against which their own views may appear liberal and egalitarian (p. 17).

Yet both prior to this statement and following it, Saxton positions one particular white speaker as ‘demonstrating transparently racist views’, ones that included ‘blatant racist expressions’. In this example, Saxton appears to implicitly discern between white people who use ‘blatant racist expressions’, and those who don’t. Whilst her concern is obviously with the explicit voicing of racism by white people, her framing of the discussion in this way fails to clearly locate herself as a white person who similarly exists in a relationship to racism and race privilege, and thus sets up a binary between those who appear to be explicitly racist, and those who ‘just’ live in a racist society. Further on in the paper, Saxton offers the important insight that white participants who refer to those who are outspokenly racist in the political arena may be seen as attempting to:

obscure the racial basis of white race privilege and [thus] distance the speaker, and the white elite with whom he identifies, from their complicity in maintaining and reproducing racial inequality (p. 18).

Whilst Saxton is indeed correct in making such a statement, she does not apply it to the logic presented within her own writing above, nor does it lead her to position herself as benefiting from white privilege.

My challenging of the use of the concept ‘bad racists’ is of course not to suggest that psychologists should not view individual acts of discrimination as oppressive. Rather, my point here is that all white people living in Australia benefit from race privilege, no matter how differentially we may be positioned in relation to the norm of middle-class heterosexual masculinity. As a result, explicit acts of racism must be understood as occurring within a social milieu that in some way condones such acts. This is not to say that white people cannot challenge white privilege. Rather my point is that drawing distinctions between good and bad white people masks white privilege (Wong, 1994). In the sections that follow, I provide an account of how it is that this denial of privilege produces a particular white subject who is positioned through a series of melancholic identifications that are themselves a product of histories of colonial violence.

**Racial Melancholia**

I begin this section with some definitions. In his 1917 essay on ‘Mourning and Melancholia’, Freud proposed two distinctly different forms of grief: the first – mourning – involves the acceptance of loss, and the acknowledgment that the lost object can be relinquished. In Freud’s understanding, mourning is a process that leads to acceptance. Melancholia, however, is less about acceptance, and more about a refusal to let go of that which has been lost. This results in a form of ‘psychic consumption’, where the lost object is ‘taken in’ – it is retained by the melancholic subject and incorporated into (and indeed instantiates) their sense of self. Whilst this may produce a subject who appears to have come to terms with their loss, it in fact constitutes a subject who continues to seek nourishment from that loss – the lost object becomes central to who they are.

Yet Freud does not stop there. He proposes not only that the lost object becomes central to the psychic life of the melancholic subject, but that this subject moves not from dissatisfaction to satisfaction as a result of the incorporation of the lost object, but rather to greater dissatisfaction and resentment for the feelings of loss towards the object that accrue. In other words, as the melancholic subject grows to resent the object for being lost, they too become to resent that aspect of themselves, one that may well be foundational to their sense of self. Thus, as Anne Anlin Cheng (2001, p. 9) suggests:
The melancholic is stuck in more ways than just temporally: he or she is stuck – almost choking on – the hateful and loved thing that he or she has devoured.

As a result, the melancholic subject in effect turns against themselves – they cannot be free of what they have incorporated, cannot let go of their grief, and thus must find ways of disavowing their melancholic position.

In her text *The Psychic Life of Power*, Judith Butler (1997) suggests that the effects of melancholia thus in part instigate the illusory binary of internal and external: the incorporation of a lost object produces a psychic space which is claimed as internal – as the property of the melancholic subject. In this sense, such a subject is produced only through its relationship to loss – to be a subject founded upon loss is to always already be reliant upon the lost object itself.

Perhaps the clearest instance of the aforementioned disavowal of melancholia in Australia may be seen in the dogged adherence to the fiction of Terra Nullius, both in land rights cases, where white laws continue to be used to deny indigenous ownership (Moreton-Robinson, 2004), and in the social structuring of Terra Nullius as a founding myth of the white nation. As will perhaps be self-evident to many readers, the assumption of the fiction of Terra Nullius continues to inform much of government policy around indigenous rights (where indigenous rights are seen as 'special interests', rather than as *a priori* rights to sovereignty), and in the ways in which white people talk about and represent indigenous people as somehow undeserving of rights (Riggs & Augoustinos, 2004). These are issues that I will return to in the analysis section, but it should suffice to say here that the construction of this land called Australia as itself always already a lost object – as something that was claimed at the same time as it was not available for the claiming – continues to haunt the white nation. In this regard, both Cheng (2001) and Butler (1997) suggest that the notion of melancholia is inherently connected to place, belonging and ownership. Butler suggests that “melancholia produces a set of spatializing tropes for psychic life” (p. 171), whilst Cheng suggests that much like melancholia: the racial question is an issue of *place*… Segregation and colonialism are internally fraught institutions not because they have eliminated the other but because they need the very thing they hate or fear. (p. 12, original emphasis)

Butler’s statement points us towards the notable effects that result from the types of psychic life that are valourised within white Western cultures. The neoliberal individual is a subject who claims themself for *themself*: the white individual subject is self-possessing, belonging to itself, and in control of itself. To claim a place as a white subject is thus to claim entitlement to place itself. Melancholia in this sense works in the service of the white nation, where a psychic life can be claimed on behalf of the nation and its (white) subjects that is all encompassing, all knowing and irrefutable. Yet, as Cheng (2001) suggests, these claims are made not because the white nation has actually succeeded in achieving its claims to irrefutability – far from it. Rather, what is being disavowed – what has been lost – is the very ability to be free of that which it hates or fears: that which cannot be incorporated. Thus whilst the white nation may disclaim any notion of melancholia as part of its existence, such melancholia is central to its very claims to sovereignty. Thus we could infer that to be an intelligible white subject is to be a melancholic subject.

These points about a melancholic white subject of course hold important implications for how we understand the operations of racialised power in Australia. As Cheng (2001) suggests, “the model of melancholic incorporation, far from prescribing or reifying the conditions of the racial other, reveals an intricate world of psychical negotiation that unsettles the simplistic division between power and powerlessness” (p. xi). Importantly, she also suggests that “racial melancholia serves not as a description of the feeling of a group of people but as a theoretical model of identity” (p. xi). To be an intelligible white subject in this sense is not to be any particular type of person as a result of the feelings that one holds, but rather to be produced precisely because of ones location in the context of a nation that is itself founded on particular sentiments. Whilst these sentiments may be inherently ambivalent (in that the white nation is reliant upon the incorporation of particular lost objects that it continually repudiates), there is nonetheless a certain national sentiment that we may refer to as melancholic.

To be a white melancholic subject produced in a relation to a constitutive loss is to be entrapped in a paradoxical relationship to oneself: to be forever engaged in both disavowing one’s own violent histories, whilst claiming for oneself a positive sense of racial identity (in order to legitimate privilege). As I will suggest in the following section, one of the ways in which this paradox is managed is through particular constructions of temporality.

**Metalepsis and the Management of History**

One way to ‘get at’ the complex ways in which the melancholia of white subjectivity is managed is to focus on how history is constructed in markedly different ways according to how particular events are temporalised. Edelman (1991, p. 96) suggests that this is captured in the term ‘metalepsis’ – “the rhetorical substitution of cause for effect or effect for cause, a substitution that disturbs the relationship of early and late”. I believe the concept of metalepsis holds great potential for understanding how events ‘in the past’ are disconnected from events ‘in the present’ in order to deny white accountability for colonial violence. The
effects of metalepsis may be evident when white people retrospectively attribute blame to indigenous people for colonisation, or when white people routinely attempt to disavow our location within a racist society.

So the question that arises now is: how are the psychoanalytic concepts of melancholia and metalepsis useful for engaging in a psychological analysis of white people’s relationship to indigenous people and the fact of indigenous sovereignty? I would suggest that the answer lies again in the notion of metalepsis – if dominant (white) understandings of colonisation rely upon the disavowal of colonial violence, then the unsettling of this may allow for the voicing of a critical reading of colonisation and racism in Australia. More specifically, psychoanalysis may provide a means to understanding texts in differing ways. This may allow a reading of racism that, whilst paying attention to the structural location of racism, may also afford us the space to look at how individual people are invested in racism without resorting to the notion of racism as an ‘internal process’.

The extracts of talk in the following analysis are drawn from one focus group, comprised of four white undergraduate psychology students, conducted in 1995 on ‘race relations in Australia’. The time at which the extracts reported here were collected (June 1995) is of considerable significance as it was during a period of unprecedented public debate in Australia over indigenous entitlements to land.

In the extract that follows we can see the participants engaged in accounting for their own opinions about land rights, and justifying why they believe they, as white Australians, have a right to belong. Of particular interest are the references to historical events, and the ways in which they are managed through particular forms of accounting for white violence.

Anthony: I think the current [Indigenous land claim] just, well, sounds like a circus to me – money money going left, right and centre there. But Mabo actually, yeah, I get quite angry about that – I actually don’t feel any responsibility for my forebears.

Interviewer: Why’s that?
Anthony: Well I wasn’t there.
Barbara: Relevant point.
Anthony: Yeah. I don’t know. Just something inside, just it really made me quite angry – it is just bullshit, you know why? Well because Captain Cook didn’t sign an agreement when he, you know… I really get quite angry – it’s bullshit.
Barbara: Yeah I know.
Anthony: And I nah, no I don’t. I don’t feel any, you know, I feel responsible for what’s happening currently but I, I don’t feel guilt or umm, responsibility for my forebears.
Barbara: You can’t be responsible for something you weren’t around for.

All of the participants engage in a range of rhetorical strategies in order to justify their location as white people. At the start of the extract, Anthony uses the suggestion that ‘I don’t feel any responsibility for my forebears’ in order to deny any responsibility for white violence, and thus implicitly to deny indigenous land claims. Yet in so doing, he acknowledges the existence of his ‘forebears’, thus constructing a now/then model of history, whereby the present is somehow related to what went ‘before’. He then goes on to deny the connection between now and then, by stating that he doesn’t feel any responsibility because ‘well I wasn’t there’. In this way, he distances himself from his ‘forebears’, and denies a model of accountability that rests upon a now/then model of history. Further on in the extract, Anthony states that ‘Captain Cook didn’t sign an agreement…’ to which we could append ‘back then’, and he then goes on to say that ‘I really get quite angry’, to which we could add ‘now’. Here Anthony implicitly creates a distinction between ‘then’ (and its implication in colonial violence), and ‘now’, in which he feels justified in ‘feeling angry’ (or indeed not feeling guilty).

I would suggest that whilst it may appear that Anthony effectively distances himself from acts of colonising violence, the understanding of metalepsis that a psychoanalytic reading of racism may provide can allow us to view the text differently. Thus Anthony’s claim to anger in the ‘now’ may be read as an enactment of the ongoing violence that he represses when he shifts the talk away from ‘Captain Cook… when he, you know…’. In this way, the distinction between now and then is challenged, thus evidencing the disavowal of ongoing acts of white violence. This reading is reinforced in Anthony’s last turn, where he states that ‘I feel responsible for what’s happening currently but I don’t feel guilty or umm responsibility for my forebears’. Here again, Anthony returns to a construction of history that denies a connection between now and then that fails to adequately account for why he ‘feel[s] responsible for what’s happening currently’. His denial of guilt for his forebears may thus be read as an attempt at distancing himself from his reference to Captain Cook and white violence in his prior turn. We can see this in the interactional trouble that he faces in expressing this to his fellow participants, whereby in his final turn Anthony repeats himself a number of times, changes his claims about accountability (from ‘I don’t feel any you know’ to ‘I feel responsible’), and uses the word ‘but’ to signal a break between what he will and will not be held responsible for (Billig, 1999).

From this brief extract of talk I would propose that to feel responsible for something (but to disavow any guilt) may represent a symptom of melancholic incorporation. In other words, to have incorporated a lost object at the level of the collective psyche (such as the lost, but never actually possessed, claim to white
belonging) is to be formed in a relationship to that loss. But to acknowledge that loss would be to acknowledge why that loss happened. In the case of colonisation, the narrative of the triumphant white settler requires a disavowal of the failure of colonisation to adequately displace indigenous sovereignty, or to fully write white sovereignty as an a priori fact. Yet this disavowal continues to hold a trace of the original recognition of loss: the affect of white subjectivities is forever marked by this loss – it is something that white Australians are always managing in our day to day relations in the context of a nation that never quite manages to contain its anxieties over ownership.

Conclusions

To extrapolate, then, from my earlier points on racial melancholia to the previous analysis, we may understand that to feel responsible, but to not be able to state what that responsibility represents, demonstrates how metalepsis operates to repress white violence. Not only, as I suggested earlier, does cause become substituted for effect, but in the analysis above, a particular effect (land claims) produces a particular affect (white anger over land claims), yet no cause for this is elaborated. This disjoining of cause from effect allows white Australians to either claim ignorance of the ongoing effects of colonisation, or to refute that reparation is required as a result of these ongoing effects. But what are we to make of references to ‘Captain Cook’ and ‘forebears’? How do these references fit into a schema of effect that has no cause? I would suggest that comments such as those about Captain Cook demonstrate both the disjunction between now/then accounts of history, and the contingency of the ‘now’ on the ‘then’.

In regards to anti-racist practice, my brief elaboration of racial melancholia within this paper has been intended to highlight some of the limitations of focusing on racism as the product of ‘bad racists’. The participants in the focus group are not exceptional for words, to experience a melancholic position, and to manage this in any way possible is, I would suggest, the primary way in which white people are rendered intelligible as racial subjects. Anti-racism from this perspective is not about pointing out racism per se, but rather about beginning the work of working through how it is that white privilege operates, how it is founded upon colonial violence, and what this means for white people living in Australia. This would not be about ‘moving beyond’ race or melancholia necessarily, but rather about acknowledging precisely why melancholia functions as it does, and the implications of this for how we talk about and understand racism. Understanding white subjectivities as social practices rather than individual possessions may thus enable us to examine how racism operates as constitutive of subjectivities, rather than as an after effect produced by ‘bad racists’.

Acknowledgments

I begin by acknowledging the sovereignty of the Kaurna people, the First Nations people upon whose land I live in Adelaide, South Australia. Thanks to Martha, Derek, Amy and Vic for comments on this paper, to Lucinda Sale for data collection, and to Greg for proof reading.

References