Racism in Australia: Cultural imperialism, disempowerment & violence

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Teaching about oppressions through space

Iris Marion Young’s identification of the five faces of oppression, published in her important book in 1990, have had a notable influence within geography. Two of the first geographical applications of Young’s framework included David Harvey’s (1993) focus on the exploitative working and living conditions of non-legal agricultural labourers in the United States and Glenda Laws’ (1994) review of the circumstances of women within contemporary western cities. In both of these works Young’s five concepts of oppression (exploitation, marginalisation, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and violence) were used as categorical devices through which manifestations (and mechanisms) of inequality could be articulated. Both authors also applied the concepts ‘in space’. In an introductory textbook for university students Waitt and others (2000:10-4,486-7) applied the five forms of oppression to real world examples within Australia and New Zealand. The concepts can also be used to construct broad-brush stories, such as the experience of Muslim Australians (Dunn, 2000:280). Together these, and other, uses indicate the utility of Young’s categorisation for researching and teaching about oppression.

One of the key reasons behind the utility of Young’s ‘five faces of oppression’ was the clear demarcation between concepts. Terms like exploitation and marginalisation had been used in geography during the 1980s. The most notable application of “marginalisation” has been Winchester and White’s (1988) assessment of marginalised groups within western European cities. The examination of exploitation had long been a focus of the work of economic geographers influenced by Marxist political economy. These works were very careful in defining the key concepts used; however, they operated in isolation from one another. More generally, terms like exploitation, marginalisation, inequality and oppression have been deployed in a definitionally careless manner. This has also been the case in research on racism. Racism has been defined in a multitude of ways. A host of different terms are used to describe what are sometimes called racism, these have included: intolerance, discrimination, ethnocentrism, prejudice, racism, and bigotry. One of the great advantages of Young’s bold demarcation of forms of oppression was the definitional clarity it provided for a discipline like geography where (at least in this part of the world) there remains a fundamental (almost over-riding) interest in social and environmental justice (Dunn, 2003a:iv).

Young’s categorisation allows for a systematic assessment of inequality. These oppressions can be discerned in the field, assessed through “observable behaviour, status, relationships, distributions, texts and other cultural artifacts” (Young, 1990:64). In other words, Young’s five concepts are readily operationalised in social science. In this paper Young’s five categories of oppression are applied to findings from research on racism in Australia. The call for papers for this session on Geographies of Oppression expressed a three-fold interest in: examples of the five forms of oppression; ways in which those forms are played out in and through places; and; in means of addressing those mechanisms of oppression. The emphasis in this paper is on the second of those interests, though this involves a discussion of the five forms.

Method

Between October and December 2001 a telephone survey commissioned by the University of NSW and Macquarie University – the UNSW/MQU Racism Survey – interviewed 5056 residents throughout the states of Queensland and NSW. Respondents were asked how often, if ever, they had experienced discrimination because of their ethnic origin, across nine spheres. Four of these spheres were what can be called settings for the experience of ‘institutional racism’ and included: the workplace; educational settings; when seeking to rent or buy a home, or; in dealings with the police. The data from these questions provide insight into experiences of exploitation, cultural imperialism and violence. The other five spheres embraced what have been referred to as the settings of ‘everyday racism’. These included experiences in shops or at a restaurant, and also at sporting or other public events. Extending this latter category of everyday racism, respondents were asked how often they felt that, because of their ethnic origin, they had been treated less respectfully, not trusted, or called names or insulted. These survey questions have provided data on the experience of powerlessness, which Young (1990) identified as related to a lack of respect. More overtly, they generated data on violence, operationalised as reported experiences of violence, vilification and other incivilities based upon ethnic prejudice.

Collection of data on the experience of discrimination is the most innovative approach to developing indicators on the extent of racism. This approach has been developed and applied by a research team based at the University of Michigan, USA. This form of
indicator on the extent of racism had never before been empirically applied in the Australian circumstance.

Almost all respondents were gracious in stating their age, gender, educational, and cultural background (e.g. only 30 refused to answer the education question). The likelihood of answering the questions on experiences of racism varied very little across gender, age, education or birthplace.

**Background: data on the experience of racism in Australia**

Reports from anti-racism agencies and non-government organisations (NGOs) have consistently found that racism in Australia is a substantive social problem (Australian Council of Trade Unions, 1995; Jones, 1997; Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1991, 2001). Reports from NGOs have included annual reports assembled by the Executive Council of Australian Jewry (see Jones, 1997), the Australian Council of Trade Unions (see 1995), the state-based anti-discrimination boards (see for example Anti-Discrimination Board of NSW, 1996), as well as infrequent reports from groups like the Committee of Arab Australians and the NSW Community Relations Commission (Browning et al., 2003).

**The experience of racism in institutional settings**

The data in Table 1 indicate that the experience of racism in institutional settings impacts close to one-in-six Australians. It was expected that the workplace would be one of the key spheres from which experiences of racism would be reported. Well over half of all formal complaints of racism in NSW come from incidents in the workplace (see A-DB, 1996:18-20). The UNSW/MGU survey reported sixteen per cent of respondents as having experienced racism within their workplace, whereas reports for other institutional spheres were fewer (last row in Table 1). The experience of discrimination on the basis of ethnicity was also strong within education, which includes schools, the technical training sector and higher education.

A key explanation for the higher levels of racism experienced in the workplace is the greater degree of cross-cultural contact in that sphere, compared to the other institutional settings. Our survey included three questions on the degree, if any, of cultural mixing that respondents had with members of other cultural groups. The three key settings were the workplace, social life and sporting circles. Fifty-two per cent of respondents reported cross-cultural contact in the workplace ‘often’ or ‘very often’. Social life gave rise to lower rates of such contact (22.7%). Sport was also less likely to be a setting for frequent encounters with members of other cultural groups (only 29.5% of respondents). As the workplace is a key site of cross-cultural contact, then it would be expected that there would be greater opportunity for discrimination based upon ethnic origin. Educational institutions are also sites of compulsory cross-cultural contact. It should be noted, however, that the workplace and education, as key sites of cross-cultural contact, are also important settings for developing inter-communal understanding and anti-racism. It is worth noting too that 6.4 per cent of respondents reported an experience of discrimination from their dealings with police or while seeking accommodation. These are indicators of racism within key service provision sectors. The former sector is responsible for community safety and the latter for access to urban resources. That one-in-fifteen people have experienced racism within those sectors, and the associated degradation of their citizenry, is a cause for deep concern.

**Everyday racisms**

Respondents were also asked about everyday forms of racism suffered in restaurants, at sport, in the streets and in other everyday transactions and activities. The experiences of these everyday racisms feed into the construction of fearful social environments. Threats of violence and ambient incivility can deprive people of their freedom of movement, expression and affiliation. It can fundamentally undermine citizenship and degrade belonging. “What is seen and heard in schools, neighbourhoods … shapes understandings of self” (Amin & Thrift, 2002:292). At its worst, such incivility can become expected, unquestioned or tolerated. This is another marker of what has become called ‘everyday racism’ (Essed 1991 cited Vasta, 1996:49,70). We think here of sporting arenas, and other public forums, where racialised and racist discourse (as well as misogynist and homophobic discourses) are considered ‘normal’.

The reported experience of racism in settings such as, shops (16.5%) and sporting events (14.8%) were about the same as for the institutional contexts of the workplace and in education. Again, sporting events and shopping centres can be places of compulsory cross-cultural contact. All four are sites in which everyday discourses of ‘race’, nation and racism are continuously repeated and reinscribed. They are contexts in which these discourses are largely peer regulated, beyond the scrutiny of any formal, regulatory or anti-racist mechanisms. The most noteworthy findings are the generally higher levels of racism experienced in the form of disrespectful treatment, lack of trust and name-calling. The former and latter forms of ‘everyday racism’ are by far the highest. Between one-in-four and one-in-five respondents from NSW and Queensland had experienced disrespectful treatment or abuse on the basis of their ethnicity. Extrapolating from these results, almost a quarter of Australians experience these forms of ‘everyday racism’.
Table 1: Experience of racism in institutional settings (work, education, housing & policing), by ethnicity, NSW and Queensland, 2001 (Source: The UNSW/MQU Racism Survey, telephone survey, Oct-Dec 2001)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experience of racism*</th>
<th>In the workplace</th>
<th>In education</th>
<th>In housing</th>
<th>In policing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ATSI</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes (n:94)</td>
<td>28.7</td>
<td>36.2</td>
<td>21.3</td>
<td>23.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No (n:4957)</td>
<td>15.9</td>
<td>14.5</td>
<td>6.1</td>
<td>6.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LOTE</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes (n:718)</td>
<td>35.7</td>
<td>29.8</td>
<td>16.3</td>
<td>15.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No (n:4338)</td>
<td>12.9</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>4.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birthplace</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overseas (n:701)</td>
<td>35.1</td>
<td>24.5</td>
<td>16.0</td>
<td>15.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK/NZ (n:474)</td>
<td>21.7</td>
<td>10.8</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>5.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australia (n:3869)</td>
<td>11.9</td>
<td>13.6</td>
<td>4.6</td>
<td>4.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All (n: 5056)</td>
<td>16.2</td>
<td>14.9</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>6.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: LOTE (Language Other Than English). ATSI (Aboriginal n:84 and Torres Strait Islander n:10). UK (United Kingdom n:352) / NZ (New Zealand n:142) *Question wording: How often have YOU experienced discrimination because of your OWN ETHNIC ORIGIN in the following situations?

The culturally uneven experience of racism

Studies of racism in Australia indicate that the experience of racism would be culturally uneven. There is a now substantive literature on dominant representations of cultural groups, such as in media and other forums. These problematic portrayals are likely linked to historic constructions of national identity, and of who is and is not an Australian. Young’s notion of cultural imperialism is a form or oppression in which the experiences and ways of life of a dominant cultural group are universalised as the national cultural norm (the Self), whereas the culture of sub-ordinate groups are erased or constructed as nationally deviant (the Other). Australia has a still strong legacy of an Anglo-Celtic national norm, within which Asian-Australians, Muslims, and Indigenous people are Others (Hamilton 1990; Rajkowski 1987; Rizvi 1996: 176-7). Hence an expectation of this project was that the experience of racism would be culturally uneven.

In recent years, reports of racist violence and ethnic discrimination in Australia have grown rather than diminished. In the immediate aftermaths of terror attacks, in the USA in September 2001 and in Bali in October 2002, reports of racist violence against Australian Muslims dramatically escalated. There was a series of attacks against mosques, including the complete destruction of a mosque in Brisbane. There were 40 formal reports to NSW Police in the week following the Bali bombings (Lipari, 2002:6). The Commissioner noted, “even more incidents are going unreported”, and he instructed police to step up surveillance of mosques and Muslim schools across NSW (NSW Police Service, 2002). The Executive Council of Australian Jewry reported that racist violence against Jews had also increased since September 2001, with over 500 documented acts each year. The construction of some groups as Other, and nefarious community perceptions of them, are a form of cultural imperialism that underpins racist acts against members of such groups.

The rates of racism experienced by Indigenous Australians were generally more than double that for non-indigenous people. Experiences of racism in the workplace were reported by 28.7 per cent of indigenous respondents, the figure for education was 36 per cent, housing 21 per cent, and policing 23 per cent (Table 1). The most significant of the institutional settings was education: where at least one-in-three indigenous respondents reported such intolerance (whereas for all non-indigenous respondents the ratio was one-in-seven). Indigenous respondents had by far the highest rates of racist experiences while seeking accommodation or in dealings with police. The reported rates of everyday racisms experienced by Indigenous Australians were also high, with forty-three per cent responding that they had been treated with disrespect on the basis of their indigeneity, and 37 per cent the recipients of racist abuse (Table 2).

The experience of racism for those respondents who spoke a language other than English was dramatically higher than for those who only spoke English. For most of the spheres and forms tested, the rates were almost three times higher amongst those with a language other than English (LOTE). The rates experienced for LOTE respondents within the institutional settings were: workplace 36 per cent, education 30 per cent, housing 16 per cent and policing 16 per cent. The LOTE attribute provides an indicator of the experience of non-Anglo-Australia. Extrapolating our results suggests that while one-in-eight Anglo-Australians may experience racism within the workplace, the ratio among non-Anglo-Australians is more than one-in-three. LOTE respondents reported experiencing discrimination in housing and policing at almost four times the rate of non-LOTE respondents. Close to one-in-two LOTE respondents reported being treated disrespectfully or abused on the basis of their ethnicity.

Those born overseas (but not in the UK and NZ) reported experiences of racism at rates similar to those who spoke a language other than English. The contrast between the overseas born and those born in Australia largely replicated that between LOTE and non-LOTE.
respondents. The experience of workplace-based racism was three times that of the Australia-born, in housing and policing the variation was even more extreme, and for the other spheres of racist experience the rate was double.

Table 2: Experience of everyday racisms, by ethnicity, NSW and Queensland, 2001  
(Source: The UNSW and MQU Racism Survey, telephone survey, Oct-Dec 2001)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Experience of racism</th>
<th>In a shop or a restaurant*</th>
<th>At sport or other public event*</th>
<th>You are treated with dis-respect**</th>
<th>People treat you with mistrust**</th>
<th>You are called names or insulted**</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ATSI</td>
<td>Yes (n:94)</td>
<td>33.0</td>
<td>31.9</td>
<td>42.6</td>
<td>30.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No (n:4957)</td>
<td>16.2</td>
<td>14.4</td>
<td>21.6</td>
<td>13.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LOTE</td>
<td>Yes (n:718)</td>
<td>30.9</td>
<td>27.7</td>
<td>42.5</td>
<td>32.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No (n:4338)</td>
<td>14.1</td>
<td>12.7</td>
<td>18.7</td>
<td>10.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birthplace</td>
<td>Overseas (n:701)</td>
<td>29.4</td>
<td>26.1</td>
<td>39.1</td>
<td>29.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>UK/NZ (n:474)</td>
<td>11.4</td>
<td>15.6</td>
<td>20.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>All (n: 5056)</td>
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<td>16.5</td>
<td>14.8</td>
<td>22.1</td>
<td>14.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Question wording: How often have YOU experienced discrimination because of your OWN ETHNIC ORIGIN in the following situations?
** Question wording: How often do you feel that because of your own ETHNIC ORIGIN…?

The experiences of the United Kingdom and New Zealand born were generally closer to those of the Australia-born than those of respondents born in other countries. For three spheres the experience of racism was slightly lower than for the Australia-born – in education, in shops and mistrustful treatment. However, in the workplace, and in regard to insults and name calling, and to a lesser extent at sporting events, the rates of racist experience were much higher than for the Australia born. These racisms may be linked to sheep shagging ‘jokes’ and references to whining POMs (and Pommy bastards) that are given airings in the workplace and at sporting events. It is also likely that Maori people would have composed some of the 142 New Zealanders who were surveyed. Their experiences of racism could follow the pattern of other people of colour, such as indigenous Australians as discussed above.

Australians of a non-Anglo background and indigenous Australians are more likely to experience racism. The reported rates of everyday racism experienced by Indigenous Australians, those born overseas, and those who speak a LOTE were often double the non-indigenous, Australia-born and non-LOTE respondents. The variation in the experience of racism in institutional settings was even more dramatic. Generally, those who spoke a Language Other than English at home, and Indigenous Australians, experienced much higher rates of all types of racism. These findings confirm the anecdotal evidence collected by HREOC, anti-discrimination agencies, and NGOs (see for most recent data HREOC, 2001:16-18).

**Anti-racism initiatives**

Kobayashi (1994:78) advocated the need to confront the discourses of racism "on the very sites where they are produced and nourished". Anti-racism, as a means for addressing the mechanisms of oppression, is the focus of on-going work not reported on here. We have found that racism has regional variations in the level and nature of racism (Dunn & Geeraert, 2003; Forrest et al., 2002). Our current project is overtly aimed at generating decision-making support tools for central and local government, as well as community groups and other institutions, to aid their development of anti-racism strategies.

**The geographies of oppression**

Clearly, oppressions manifest themselves through certain spheres of life, more so than in others. The
References


Dunn, K.M. & Geeraert, P. 2003: "The geography of ‘race’ and racisms", *GeoDate*, 16(3), 1-6


