

Heterosexism, racism and psychology

PSYCHOLOGICAL research has often focused on the effects of racism and (less often) heterosexism upon marginalised groups. However, a brief survey of the literature suggests that we have seldom examined how social norms around race and sexuality work to *privilege* particular groups of people, nor have we adequately addressed how these norms inform the discipline of psychology itself (notable exceptions being Dudgeon *et al.*, 2000; Howitt & Owusu-Bempah, 1994; Kitzinger & Perkins, 1993; Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1993). Whilst it is indeed the case that the recent turn to both whiteness and queer studies have made some impact upon the discipline (e.g. Fine, 1997; Mun Wong, 1994; Riggs, 2004), there still does not exist a sustained critique of heterosexual or white race privilege from within the mainstream.

One of the outcomes of this failure to attend to issues of privilege is that psychological research focusing on sexuality or race primarily examines the experiences of non-heterosexual and non-white individuals respectively, the implication being that issues of sexuality or race are only of relevance to these groups of people. Whilst this may for many be



DAMIEN W. RIGGS and PRECILLA Y. L. CHOI examine the role of *privilege in research and practice.*

a relatively commonsense assumption, we propose that there is a great need for dominant group members within the discipline to (a) explore how their/our identities are most often left unexamined, and thus (b) recognise how this often results in a failure to acknowledge how certain (dominant) groups experience privilege as a result of the oppression of other (marginalised) groups. In other words, a focus within psychological research or practice primarily on the experiences of marginalised group members may do very little to examine how marginalisation occurs precisely because of particular social norms.

In order to demonstrate one of the ways in which we as psychologists may examine our own privilege, we draw on examples from our own work, and highlight the ways we have challenged or colluded with privilege. Inherent within this examination are our own statuses as privileged and oppressed individuals: that is, each of us has multiple statuses in society (such as those shaped through discourses of gender, sexuality, race/ethnicity and economic status); all of which have differing values accorded to them. Some statuses confer privilege, whilst others are experienced as oppressive. We engage in this examination in the spirit of productive critique: our goal is not to attack the discipline, rather to create a dialogue over how we as psychologists (and particularly those of us

who identify as dominant group members) may best address issues of racism and heterosexism within the discipline.

Heterosexism and racism – Commission and omission

In her work on focus groups, Braun (2000) suggests that heterosexism may appear in two forms: either by commission – ‘the explicit articulation of heterosexist assumptions’, such as assuming that a person’s partner is of the ‘opposite sex’; or by omission – ‘the lack of disagreement with, or challenge to, heterosexist talk’, such as failing to challenge heterosexist statements made by others. Understood in these ways, heterosexism occurs in research that privileges particular social norms around sexuality, and that fails to challenge or adequately explore these norms.

We would also suggest that these notions of commission and omission may be tentatively mapped across to examine racism in Western societies. We do not believe it is productive to claim that experiences of oppression are ‘all the same’. Our point is that racism often plays out in research and practice settings as the result of implicit norms, whereby the values of the dominant white culture are taken as the norm. Dominant group members may then have little motivation to explore how we/they stand to benefit from social norms around race.

WEBLINKS

Australian Critical Race and Whiteness Studies

Association: www.acrawsa.org.au

Heterosexism Enquirer magazine:

www.mun.ca/thethemain.html

Students Challenging Racism and (White)

Privilege: www.canopyweb.com/racism

Racism by commission is well illustrated in Tannoeh-Bland's (1998) work on white race privilege. She proposes that white privilege is evident when, as a white person:

- I can, without material loss, choose to be surrounded by people of my race most of the time.
- I can get 'flesh' coloured bandages which match the colour of my skin.
- If I am depressed, I can go to a counsellor, psychologist or psychiatrist who shares my basic cultural assumptions and psychic world view, and who will not explain that I must change my belief and value system, forfeit my cultural identity, in order to exist in this society without a high level of pain.

These examples demonstrate how the norms of white culture shape the everyday lives of all people – either to privilege or oppress. Those of us who are white can presume that our cultural values are the norm, that other people will see the world the way we do, and that our health will not be hindered (and will most likely benefit) from ongoing histories of oppression.

In the boxes on these pages, we challenge the assumption that equality exists within psychology by providing some examples of how we have been oppressed and privileged by, and have challenged and colluded with, the social norms that exist in regard to race and sexuality within the context of psychological research. The 'oppression and privilege' example (this page) shows how experiences of heterosexism do not negate the benefits gained from identifying as white in a culture that privileges white Western values. The second box (p.291) examines how heterosexism played out in a specific research example.

The second scenario illustrates very well Braun's (2000) question: What is more important – collecting data or challenging oppression? It also highlights our earlier point about privilege: it may often be the case that dominant group members conduct research in ways that potentially ignore their/our location as part of a dominant culture, something that may well impact upon our participants if they do not identify with the same cultural group. In other words, it is often presumed that our research will not be harmful to our participants, yet, as this second example suggests, simply carrying out research

without interrogating privilege may not necessarily translate into research practices that are either non-discriminatory or non-oppressive.

This point about research and privilege highlights the power relations inherent in psychological research and practice, and from which psychologists cannot easily escape. For example, whilst we suggest that there is a need to challenge heterosexism and racism, we also recognise the threat that exists for being accused of 'bad research practice'. Thus, in challenging normative assumptions (such as confronting racism with our peers or raising the topic of non-heterosexual families with students) there is always the risk that we may be accused of unethical practice. Whilst we don't have any answers to this dilemma, it is an important issue to

raise, as it has serious implications for the role of activism in research and practice.

Routinely examining privilege

The previous points about power and the role of activism in both research and practice highlight the need for any challenge to privilege to move beyond simply identifying omissions or commissions. Thus as Braun (2000) suggests, we also need to examine more broadly the power structures that are endemic to research and practice, and to develop more ethical ways of asking research questions that are built around examining multiple power relations, instead of considering them *post hoc*.

In this light, it is important to bear in mind that participants and researchers or practitioners and clients interact with one

OPPRESSION AND PRIVILEGE – Damien Riggs

Some of my recent research has involved examining how lesbian and gay foster parents are represented within psychological research and in society more broadly. Whilst at times this has resulted in my experiencing discrimination, it has also resulted in times when I have felt my values as a gay foster parent and researcher to be respected. In one particular such instance I felt encouraged when a social worker sought to speak with me about my experiences as a foster parent in a same-sex relationship. During this conversation, several (heterosexual) foster carers were listening, and were variously nodding in agreement or supporting what I was saying. It felt amazing! I was actually being listened to and respected by a group of (white) heterosexual foster parents and a social worker!

Once the conversation ended, one of the foster parents asked the social workers how the 'Aboriginal problem' was going. The building that we met in was in the city, and the foster parent was referring to the ongoing contests over space between the local white majority and the indigenous people who are the traditional owners of the land on which the city stands. When the worker replied, 'OK, I suppose,' the foster parent then proceeded to elaborate her question, by stating that she used to work in this building, and always felt uncomfortable going outside for a cigarette or to get lunch, as there were always Aboriginals sitting around outside. They would often ask for money or a cigarette, she said. The worker then replied by saying, 'We don't see many of them near here any more – I don't have those problems.' This line of conversation made me extremely uncomfortable,

exacerbated by the fact that two indigenous social workers were sitting nearby. At this stage we were called back to the larger group to resume the meeting, and I did not make the opportunity to challenge the foster parent's comments.

Here it is possible to see how I was involved in racism by omission – I failed to challenge the foster parent's (and indeed the worker's) comments about indigenous people. My experience of feeling safe in the (predominantly white, heterosexual) environment led me to be in tacit agreement with their comments. Thus my choice not to 'risk' confronting the people (and thus potentially losing the rapport we had developed) was made possible by my location as a white person. This demonstrates how all white people are complicit with racism – it is not simply the case that the two people who spoke about 'Aboriginal problems' were racist, and I was not. Rather, my location as a white person means that I am always already complicit with their comments – I stand to benefit from the same privileges as they do, and I too live on land stolen from indigenous people.

This example also shows how privilege and oppression are so closely related. Whilst I (as a white gay man) have often experienced heterosexism, I have not been subjected to racism directed against me. Indeed, I benefit from racism for – I am able to move about in public spaces and ask questions about foster care most often without challenge because I am white. (For more on the difference between racism for and racism against, see Fine, 1997.) This may be a markedly different experience for an indigenous person (for example) seeking to do the same thing.

another through a myriad of social relationships. For example, non-white participants may feel oppressed by the racial norms and privileges employed by white researchers, and non-heterosexual practitioners may feel attacked or ridiculed by heterosexual clients. Positions of power thus do not automatically correspond with who is conducting the research or providing the therapeutic practice. Rather, our location within the relationships we have to others results from the intersecting ways in which we are identified according to the norms of race and sexuality (amongst many others). Whilst it is possible that researchers and practitioners may refuse to involve or treat any participants or clients who enact racism or heterosexism against them, this does not prevent the researcher or practitioner from feeling oppressed or abused. Similarly, clients and participants who feel oppressed by practitioners or researchers may terminate their therapy or research involvement, but this does not necessitate a challenge to the practitioner's or

researcher's privilege. Our suggestion, then, is that an examination of privilege needs to be undertaken by dominant group members as part of a reflexive practice, rather than on the instigation of those who may find our privilege oppressive.

In contrast to the tenets of positivism (which often lead researchers to assume a position of objectivity), we have suggested

'There is a pressing need to be accountable for our privilege'

that whilst psychological practice and research may be constrained by factors such as ethical obligations, time limits and difficulty in accessing appropriate sample groups, there is still a great danger inherent in leaving privilege unchallenged. For example, in the experiences that we explored earlier, ignoring privilege often resulted in us marginalising our own identities as activists, when we instead focused on our identities as researchers. This highlights for us the importance of

understanding how our location as researchers (and this could equally apply to practitioners) is often one that holds great privilege, and that there is a pressing need to be accountable for our privilege (Riggs, 2004).

We propose that any approach to examining privilege must therefore include an understanding of power that refuses a simplistic notion of dominance/marginalisation, and which instead examines the complex ways in which we are situated in relation to what is deemed the norm. Challenging heterosexism and racism from this starting point would therefore be about more than pointing out offensive statements or 'including' minority groups in research or practice settings. Rather, it may involve examining how we are implicated in the work that we do as psychologists, and how we may stand to benefit from racialised and sexualised hierarchies. How are they played out within our research and practice, and what assumptions do we draw on when we formulate research questions or make

judgements in a practice setting? With this in mind, those of us who experience privilege may be better placed to challenge our privilege, rather than continuing to take for granted the benefits we receive from identifying as members of a dominant group.

Central for all

Examining privilege requires a willingness to understand how those of us who experience oppression as a result of sexual orientation (for example) may well in turn be involved in practices of oppression towards groups of people who differ from us in race, gender, ethnicity or class (Hooks, 1981). This may be as implicit as the privileges that those of us who are white experience, or as explicit as knowingly refusing to support the rights of marginalised groups other than our own. Looking at experiences of oppression should thus entail looking at experiences of privilege; in other words, it should involve an examination of how our experiences of oppression may intersect with our privileges and vice versa (Croteau *et al.*, 2002; Riggs, 2006).

Finally, we would suggest that these issues should be of central importance to

all psychologists, rather than simply those who work with marginalised group members, or who themselves identify as belonging to a marginalised group. Racial and sexual norms are not simply 'factors' that need to be considered in research and practice – they in many ways constitute the identities of all people living in Western societies (Riggs & Augoustinos, 2005). Understanding the ways in which race and sexuality intersect – amongst other forms of social difference: disability, class, religion, and so on – is thus central to understanding psychological phenomena. To do otherwise would be to discount the experiences of privilege and oppression that shape our lives.

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Damien thanks Precilla for all of the hard work that went into writing this article, and just wishes she were around to see it come to fruition.

HETEROSEXISM BY COMMISSION AND OMISSION – Precilla Choi

Following the completion of a focus group study, my colleagues and I realised that we had been heterosexist by commission and omission. We felt that we had potentially silenced any non-heterosexual woman in the group by assuming a heterosexual norm. As feminist researchers, and particularly for those team members who did not identify as heterosexual, we were aware how heterosexism operates, yet failed to consider it in the planning and development of our study. Thus, our own oppression as women and/or as non-heterosexuals, and in my case as a person of colour, did not prevent us from oppressing others. Having seen the problems that arose from this first study, I was determined in my next research study to actively challenge heterosexism.

My next project explored how ideologies of femininity impact upon young girls' (aged between 12 and 16 years) lived experiences. Once again a series of focus groups was conducted, though I was concerned in these that as someone who is child-free by choice I did not know how to talk to teenagers and would not be able to establish adequate rapport. One topic of discussion was what the girls wished for their futures; in response, marriage and motherhood were always brought up by the girls. Initially, when they did so I did not assume they meant heterosexual marriage and parenting and asked them about the possibility of same-sex marriage and parenting in order to avoid the explicit silencing of any non-heterosexual girls and to challenge the heterosexual norm. When I did this, the response tended to be silence – a silence that was sometimes uncomfortable or, at other times, just a non-response because the girls did not seem to know what to say. Either way, this interfered with the flow of the focus group and thereby had the potential to reduce the quality of the data collected.

It was also during one of these silences that I suddenly remembered that teaching children in schools about the existence of homosexuality is controversial and even not allowed in some countries, which made me more anxious than I already was. What if the girls told their parents or teachers that we discussed this and this made them unhappy? In the information provided in order to gain informed consent, no mention was made of the topic of homosexuality – was this grounds for complaint about me to the university human research ethics committee? I decided not to risk it and reverted to heterosexism by omission.

DISCUSS AND DEBATE

What are some ways we can build challenges to discrimination into our research practice so as to avoid accusations of unethical practice?

How are white and heterosexual privilege often reinforced in psychological education?

What does the term 'ethical' mean in the context of societies that are founded upon implicit racist and heterosexist (amongst other) norms?

How can the discipline of psychology (and the BPS more specifically) shift its focus to dominant group members/institutions so as to challenge privilege?

Have your say on these or other issues this article raises. E-mail 'Letters' on psychologist@bps.org.uk or contribute to our forum via www.thepsychologist.org.uk.

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