Researching racisms, researching multiculture

Challenges and changes to research methods

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Introduction

Anyone engaged in social research and based in a university will be familiar with the requirement to obtain ethical approval for the research project as well as the standard list of topic areas which are identified as being ‘sensitive’ and which you are required to highlight if your project relates to any of the area. Race and ethnicity are on this list. Each time I tick the little square box on the form on my screen and indicate ‘Yes, this is an area with which this project engages’ I am always struck by the range of contestations, contradictions and politics that constitute research around race and the inadequacies of labelling research relating to race with the word ‘sensitive’. This sanitised labelling of race as a sensitive subject area in universities’ ethics processes is perhaps not surprising given the institutional context of ethical approval. Yet being badged in this way resonates with what France Winddance Twine and Jonathan Warren (2000: 4) have suggested is the profound marginalisation of race politics in wider research methods literature and approaches. It is noteworthy that almost two decades since Twine and Warren’s observation, race is still a minimal presence or even entirely absent in many of the most popular and well used research methods textbooks. And while some may argue that research that investigates race is a specialised and particular field the ways in which race unevenly shapes the social world and individual lives means, as Twine and Warren suggest that all social research including that which is not necessarily or primarily about race will encounter issues of race and racism in some form and at some point.

Similarly, as urban populations in most national contexts become increasingly diverse and heterogeneous, the ways in which ethnic and cultural difference, processes of racialisation and racism can emerge, be felt, spoken of and experienced demand that social researchers are able to respond to the ways in which narratives of race might be shaping experiences and perspectives. The acknowledgement and problematisation of the ethnic and cultural contexts of research and the diversity of those populations who participate in social research need to occupy a much more central place in social science research investigations whether or not...
the immediate research focus is on race. Research training and methods literatures need to recognise and respond to these new realities and the requirement to decolonise research methods. There are research methods books that focus on social research in racialised contexts and a range of methods accounts and discussions of research projects which have researched questions of race and this overview will engage with a number of these. But it is also important to acknowledge that in higher education institutional research processes race continues to be a research area which is routinely presented as both specialised and ‘sensitive’ while in under- and postgraduate methods training race is still too often not a visible or a core area of consideration (Twine 2000).

**On race and ethnicity**

Decolonising social research involves a recognition of the tension between the ways in which race was positioned at the empirical centre of the historical development of social thought and knowledge production (Tuhiwai-Smith 2012) even as black scholars’ work was invisibilised, as the marginalisation of W. E. B. Du Bois’s 19th century development of urban sociology based on the large scale empirical investigations of racism and poverty in Philadelphia demonstrates (Back and Tate 2015; Bhambra 2014). The erasure of scholars of colour from social science and the role of race science in developing colonial social and scientific knowledge is a dynamic which has shaped sociology’s disciplinary development and requires sociologists to engage with this legacy and its current iterations and implications. Research on race is bound into an ongoing series of tensions, divisions, ambivalence and contradictions. Core to these are the essentialising categorisations of the phenomenon of race. Late 20th century shifts in social science which have argued that race has no biological basis but is a social concept, fetishising the corporeal, have repositioned it from the hierarchical terrains of the genetic to the more uncertain but equally hierarchical terrains of the cultural. The idea that race is a social category as been influential and in part has pushed a shift towards the use of the term ethnicity as a less indicted and politically saturated concept. The impact of this has been significant, with race often being avoided in many official contexts and replaced with a focus that is much more exclusively on ethnicity, multiculturalism and racism (Song 2018). However, as a number of scholars have pointed out, the ways in which race impacts the social world and everyday lives means that the arguments that emphasise the unreality of race are challenging not least because of its experiential and divisive impacts but also because as social scientists continue to research and speak of race (Nayak 2006). As Song (2018) argues, [e]ven when people articulate the idea that race is socially constructed, such assertions can be eclipsed or counteracted by evidence that many people still, ‘deep down’, subscribe (whether consciously or not) to the idea that human beings are racially different in meaningful and consequential ways. Replacing race with ethnicity – or diversity – might de-racialise cultural and corporeal difference but it is not quite the ‘get out card’ that might be imagined. Ethnicity itself becomes biologised as well as culturalised and evokes the same essentialising and hierarchical orderings implied by categories of race.

And so race has not disappeared. Nayak (2006) and St Louis (2005) have mapped the paradox of race being defined as a social construct while continuing to be widely used in academic and non-academic contexts as an ontological category. To focus on what race does and achieves is one approach for managing the tensions between researching a social category that has been assigned naturalised meanings and corporeal associations. Writing with Alice Bloch and John Solomos, we argued (Bloch, Neal, and Solomos 2013) that race remained a necessary focus as it worked as a line of social division producing inequalities around core
social resources and goods as well as creating erasures from collective identities and belongings and exclusions from processes of recognition and entitlement. Race can, in other words, be approached as a social division, but it is important to acknowledge its multiple and mutable forms – that its meanings change, can be assigned and self-identified, embodied and disembodied, a focus of political mobilisation and a focus for political rejection. As Murji argues ‘putting forward an argument that race is merely an idea or just a social construct might make social scientists seem detached from reality when viewed against the backdrop of national and global events of recent years’ (2017: 18). The mutability of race and its powerful status demands that any engagement with research on race requires dexterity and recognition of the ambivalences, harms, divisions and political intensities and associated with the concept.

It is in this context that this chapter provides an overview of some of these contestations and dilemmas that are presented by – and encountered when – conducting social research that is focused on multicultural social worlds and diverse research populations.

The political nature of racism research

Today, one of the key tenets of the ethics of social research focuses on the need for it to have social impact and benefit, or, as a minimal threshold, to do no harm, to not be deceptive, to be based on ongoing consent and project transparency. This means that research that addresses race is going to be intensely demanding given that race does harm, race is a deception and race is usually as far from open and transparent. This means that quantitative and qualitative research that investigates issues and questions of race has to acknowledge and reflect the political nature of the field of inquiry and the political nature of the particular research project. As Back and Solomos (1993: 196) noted from their research experiences while conducting research on race and local politics in the UK city of Birmingham in the early 1990s, it is impossible for research on racism not to be political in some way (see also Back and Sinha 2018; Phoenix 1994). Given that research which generates data and findings in relation to race, social relations, social resources and social processes will also generate intended and unintended impacts and interpretations in the social worlds the challenge is not only to acknowledge this but also to find ways of engaging with and managing research relating to race in highly political terrains.

Qualitative research in particular now has an embedded and more explicit commitment to reflexivity and the recognition both that social research is necessarily partial and that research can be neither politically neutral nor value-free. This paradigm shift in qualitative research approaches is largely a result of feminist and post-structuralist critiques of research methodologies that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s. The shift has been profound and, while the feminist critique has been widely recognised for its questioning of methods, focus, approach, positionality and research relationships, what is less acknowledged is the significance and the contributions that anti-racist approaches made to these debates. While research approaches that emerged directly from gender considerations are now at the heart of conventional qualitative research methodology (see above) the arguments and issues raised by anti-racist research debates are much less present.

This unevenness is striking given the extent to which there was a significant amount of shared ground in the two positions. For example, both feminist and anti-racist critiques have emphasised the partial, exclusionary and essentialising nature of social knowledge and the powerful if contradictory dynamic which either completely neglects difference and the experiences and perspectives of marginalised groups or, if there is a focus on minoritised
groups, then it often problematically reinforces assumptions, labels and stereotypes (Lawrence 1982). These overlapping concerns also underpinned a commitment to a shared agenda for doing social research differently. The ontological and epistemological repositionings that this involved also meant that a range of methodological demands became core considerations and these ranged from questions of knowledge production and wider political agendas – what and who got researched – to a focus on research relationships, what the purpose of social research on race and racism was, the ways in which research questions were framed through power and hierarchy, questions about what researchers should be doing in and with research and a recognition of researcher effect as well as more prosaic but still profound methods questions around access, rapport and trust. These were questions raised in the UK nearly four decades ago and yet they remain as pertinent and contemporary today as they were in the 1980s.

Methods challenges for researching difference

One of the key areas of discussion and overlap were the arguments for the development of standpoint or the ‘matched’ co-identities in social research relationships between researchers and research participants. As feminists made the case for the importance for women to research and interview women participants so the same case was made for the importance of black and Asian researchers conducting research with black and Asian research participants. However, the rationale and practice of ethnic matching in research interview settings has not been widely taken up and a number of black and South Asian scholars have problematised the concept and limitations of standpoint research (Gunaratnam 2003; Twine 2000). Phoenix (1994: 6) has similarly argued against the idea that there may be a ‘unitary truth about respondents lives that matched researchers are most effectively able to get to’ and highlights the variety of identities and biographical and situational experiences that disrupt as much as confirm apparent sameness (see also Puwar 1997). Although Gunaratnam (2003) is sympathetic to what she calls ‘broad matching’ in contexts of co-production and participatory research, like Phoenix she too questions the ways in which standpoint methods neatly fix and essentialise categories of identity. While ethnic matching does create agentic spaces for different research agendas, priorities and dialogue, as both Phoenix and Gunaratnam warn, matching also creates routes for white researchers to avoid engaging with questions of race and marginalising both black and minority ethnic researchers and participants in a narrowed down field of race research which gets done by black, Asian and minority ethnic researchers, while they are effectively sidelined from research on other areas of social life.

But if standpoint research is problematised it it may still be worth reflecting on how and why it works in those situations where it may be appropriate. When I was involved in a recent project researching the ‘patterns of intergenerational adults’ and children’s friendships across ethnic and social difference (Vincent, Neal, and Iqbal 2018) I was part of an ethnically diverse research team. Humera Iqbal identifies as British Pakistani and Carol Vincent and I would both identify as white British. In one interview situation with Kaleb – an Ethiopian parent participant who had lived in London since his asylum status was secured – the interview conversation covered experiences of the difficulties of settling in a new country, cultural challenges and reflected on enaging in practices of belonging while being attached to elsewhere and, speaking to Humera directly, Kaleb said ‘you understand this’. I was struck immediately by the significance of this brief exchange as it was the explicit if still coded articulation of the, until then, unspoken ways in which race, ethnic difference and connections circulated in the interview setting. This was not ethnic matching between
Humera and Kaleb in any straightforward sense but was rooted more in an intersectional sense of recognition and a summoning of sameness in the experience of difference and dislocation. This momentary exchange seems to me to speak to the urgency of thinking through the dynamics and complexities as to how ethnically and culturally diverse researchers interview across ethnic and social difference and the impact that these non-essentialised differences have in interview settings and in the co-productive processes of data generation.

These challenges become more acute given the complexities, contradictions and increasingly heterogenous demographic profile of those people who become the research populations of research projects that are focused on race questions. But research that is not about race issues also needs to engage with this non-essentialised diversity and show how and in what ways sampling strategies incorporate ethnic diversity into their logics. Again, the paucity in discussion of social difference and race in mainstream methods training and literature is striking. The late 20th century feminist and anti-racist arguments around standpoint interviewing need space for ongoing discussion but also resituation in the context of approaches that recognise the significance of intersectionality and focus ‘on the complexity of relationships among multiple social groups within and across analytical categories and not on complexities within single social groups, single categories or both’ (McCall 2005: 1786). There is also a need to extend these debates to the increasing range of quantitative and qualitative research methods and in both online and offline research environments. Even with traditional and core methods such as ethnography there is still surprisingly little methods discussion of, or guidance on, researcher immersion and observation of social settings and the people within them.

I have written with colleagues about the challenges of multicultural ethnography (Neal et al. 2015; 2018) in which the core ethnographic research process of interpreting and recording micro descriptions of the social world in which you are located as a researcher can become problematic and troubling. The research project, *Living Multiculture*, used a range of qualitative research approaches to respond to and examine the increasing complex social geographies of ethnic diversity in contemporary urban England. Based in three distinct geographies the project focused on a variety of key social spaces – such as schools, parks, cafes and leisure organisations – which would be likely to have local multicultural populations and in which everyday and routine social relationships and interactions might be reasonably expected to occur. It was in these spaces, in different geographical locations, that we hung out, spending time observing and participating. However, we became quickly unnerved by the gap between being immersed in and surrounded by superdiverse, composite, context specific and multiple identities and what we found ourselves writing in our fieldnotes as these were written in worryingly singular and essentialising ways as they tried to capture the complexity we were seeing.

In short, our fieldnotes were tending to ‘fix’/secure populations within categories of difference, of ethnicity, of national and non-national identity. Writing about seeing difference in ways which meant that perhaps we were not being nuanced and attentive but rather doing archaic ‘difference work’, reducing people to their visible characteristics and emphasising/defining (their) difference on this basis. Our fieldnote descriptions of the people in the social worlds that we were part of had a UK census-like feel to them as we wrote of there being white British, black British, South Asian, Muslim, Turkish, Eastern European, black African and Jewish people in the places we were spending time. There is a paradox in the process of looking at social practices, interactions, atmospheres and exchanges but then also relying on the corporeal and cultural signs (skin colour, dress, language, accent) that make these significant and assigning unitary ethnicity categories to identify and understand difference in order then to identify how difference may have been disrupted – or not (Gunaratnam 2003). In our attempts to change the objectification of what we described our
fieldnotes became filled with questions marks and tentative writing – lots of ‘perhaps’ and ‘appears to be’. This experience highlights the retreat to a sort of phenotypical and cultural reading, relying on descriptive ethnic classifications and the assigning of people to those in ethnographic writing but also of the centrality of the ethnographer in the ethnographic process. The challenge of how to respond to these contradictions is to design research with the limitations and challenges of any singular method in mind.

Participation, conversation and a multiple (and mobile) interviewing process can help to counter some of the ways in which the visual may become essentialised as the intersectional biographies and narratives of the participants undo identity categories as well as centering us as ethnographic researchers. And while the role of the ethnographer as the interpretive core of the research process has been problematised, their role in relation to race and difference has received less attention, despite the very present dangers that ethnographic representations of social worlds can be more about the assumptions of the ethnographer than the ‘exotic Others we colourfully stitch into our richly embroidered texts’ (Nayak 2006: 413). While there is some reflective and political scrutiny of this it tends to be confined to monographs, papers, and the few specialist methods books on race and social research such as Winddance Twine and Warren (2000), Gunaratnam (2003) and Nayak (2006). There needs to be a more integrated approach and acknowledgement of racialised positionalities, intersectionality and the meanings and implications of these for ‘mainstream’ research methods training and literature.

Research on race is not always or necessarily about research with participants who are marginalised but may also involve engagement with powerful actors and elites. An example of this comes from a research project which involved interviewing participants who had been members of the Future of Multi-Ethnic Britain Commission in the UK in the early 2000s. While the commissioners, themselves a highly multi-ethnic group, were elites in that they were all very successful, influential and often high profile professionals, academics, civil servants, media figures and policy leaders, their experiences of co-authoring a report which had been very negatively received by the then UK Labour government and by the mainstream media disrupted this status, revealing the ways in which racism reshaped social standing. The Commissioners’ retelling of their experiences for the project also reshaped our experience of conducting interviews with elite participants (see Neal and McLaughlin 2009). The racialised identities and situational experience of the commissioners destabilised their elite status and illustrates the complexities of researching race in situational contexts and the importance of an intersectional approach in social research. Such an intersectional approach not only attempts to recognise and incorporate – in a non-additive way – a range of social divisions but requires researchers to recognise what McCall (2005) defines as ‘intercategorial complexity’. It involves researchers being aware of the ways in which people’s identities, situations and biographies are likely to be multidimensional, social and relational as the stories of the Commission members and of Kaleb and Humera both demonstrate. This means that ethnic symmetries and categorisations are unlikely to provide any easy or straightforward answers to who should be doing research investigating race and racism but intersectionality also means that broader or partial ethnic matching might sometimes be appropriate to the research context (Gunaratnam 2003).

The dilemmas of research attention

This emphasis on intersectionality is not just because there is a need for more research to be conducted with communities of colour and marginalised groups. One of the key concerns is to recognise and acknowledge the broader role and presence of race politics and racism
within social research. As I argued earlier there is a profound contradiction between the history, nature and extent of research on race and the paucity of research on racism, the politics of race and racialisation. While the colonial production of race knowledge can seem like a danger of the past, it would be politically naïve not to see that the interests in race science and the representations of minority, problematised and subjugated groups reinforces and reproduces widely established labelling, stereotypes and assumptions in policy, public and everyday discourse. Both quantitative and qualitative research may be implicated in this. The seminal text *Policing the Crisis* by Stuart Hall and colleagues (1979) showed how this happened through the media but also through academic research.

Others from Birmingham’s Centre of Contemporary Cultural Studies (where Hall was based) highlighted the ways in which white researchers directly contributed to these processes pathologising young black and South Asian people as ‘problems or victims’, as lost between two cultures and in cultural crisis or locked into sub cultural deviances and criminal behaviours (Carby 1982; Lawrence 1982). For anti-racist social researchers writing in the context of race politics in the UK in the 1980s, the concerns about academic research were not only about a neglect of racism and marginalisation of black people’s experiences and perspectives nor about the ways in which the disproportionate focus of research attention on black, Asian and minority ethnic people reinforced racialised stereotypes and cultural misrepresentations but above all on how ‘their “theories” about black people help to shape public policy at every level, from the exalted heights of the Home Office to the humbler ranks of the school staff room’ (Lawrence 1982: 97). This concern about the impact of academic research converges with wider questions about the politics and purpose of social research – and the extent to which so much of social research involves a ‘downwards’ gaze with an over-research of marginal and powerless groups and the places in which they are located.

More recent social research which problematises cultural difference through an association with social conflict and ‘segregation’ continues to contribute to rather than challenge dominant racialising discourses or, more mundanely, but just as insidiously, may simply be extractive, taking experiences, perspectives and knowledge from participants without generating any benefit for them.

This concern with the over-research of certain groups highlights the dangers of representation and political positioning. This has meant that racialised and marginalised communities and populations have long been concerned about the role of research and researchers and research agendas that have a ‘research on’ rather than a ‘research with’ orientation. It is not enough to recognise the research scrutiny to which black, migrant and minority communities, Muslim communities and refugee groups are subject. The legitimacy of such a research gaze must be questioned given that research has reinforced damaging assumptions, pathologies and stereotypes and because, despite high levels of research attention, there is far too little evidence of positive change or policy intervention that is felt or experienced by those populations or in those places (Beebeejaun et al. 2013; Clarke 2008). Repeated attention results in participants literally getting tired of answering similar questions from successive cohorts of researchers without then seeing any benefits. For example, talking of Liverpool, Moore (1996) recounts how ‘research fatigue had set in in certain well studied zones as the local residents were only too willing to tell the fieldworker’.

Social researchers may be ‘outsiders’ with only a rudimentary knowledge of the localities or communities on which their research is focused and so appear spatially naïve or detached, reinforcing the sense that they are driven by different agendas to the people they are researching. Particular places as well as populations become problematised through research as well as media and policy attention. How places become presented, conceptualised and...
identified has a lasting outcome that continues to exist after the field work is concluded. Beyond the research encounter itself research produces a series of written artefacts that circulate in different networks. In re-studies in particular it was knowledge of the first round of studies by the communities concerned that prompted anxiety towards later studies (Charles and Crow 2012). Some places particularly attract research attention. The East End of London and nearby Hackney, an ethnically diverse borough in North East London, for example, have consistently attracted social researchers. Hackney’s research allure can be understood through what Karner and Parker (2010) call ‘reputational geographies’. Hackney has a long history of different migrant flows and settlements, a tradition of oppositional politics, urban disorder and its high levels social and ethnic diversity, recently accelerated by gentrification dynamics. All of this has drawn the research gaze. For example a (non-exhaustive) list of academic research about and/or based in Hackney would include (Butler and Hamnett 2011; Jones 2014, 2015; Kulz 2013; Neal et al. 2015; Vincent 1996; Rhys-Taylor 2013; Wessendorf 2014; Wright 1985) and show how multicultural places like Hackney can come to resemble ‘research labs’ for social researchers.

My own presence as member of a research team in the borough as part of the Living Multiculture project also contributed to this overcrowding as we joined this long list of scholars not to mention social commentators, writers, and artists drawn to researching in and on Hackney. Over and under-researched geographies raise political questions especially given the correlation between over-researched places and levels of social deprivation, migration, conflict, decline, gentrification and so forth. In this context it is important to understand that ‘knowledge production needs to be collaborative and relational [and] process-based rather than outcome-based inquiry’ (de Leeuw, Cameron, and Greenwood 2012: 182) so that research agendas are orientated towards co-productive approaches which ‘destabilise academia as a privileged site for the production and dissemination of knowledge’ (Bell and Pahl 2018: 107). Instead of privileging the researcher it becomes necessary to recognise the significance of the knowledge brought by participants to research teams, as data is generated through the active collaboration of researched–researcher interaction and dialogue (Sinha and Back 2013; Back and Sinha 2018; Beebeejaun et al. 2013).

But research participants are, in any case, rarely as passive as ‘extractive’ models imply. So, for example, Sukarieh and Tannock (2013) note, in the context of the over-research in the Shatila refugee camp, that minor subversions took place as participants acknowledged purposefully ‘lying’ to researchers to protect themselves and their communities. Rankin (2009) too has also examined how research participants resisted the external agendas of development professionals at the same time as using the political resources made available by external interventions. Sustained interactions with researchers can create participant ‘know how’ to make such demands. By framing the issue as one of ‘extraction’ of information the over-research arguments conceals more uneven dynamics and power relations within the research process. This highlights the co-productive nature of research relationships and chimed with the extent to which the Hackney participants in the Living Multiculture project were often confident and assertive in negotiations over their participation in the project reflecting a knowledge and ‘know how’ about social research processes. Participants negotiated access and set out expectations and participation rules with the team in some settings because key participants were familiar and confident enough with research ethics and research relationships to do this. In another dimension of this we encountered a critical approach to social research voiced by some of the policy-related participants whom we interviewed. For example, in one of these policy interviews a local authority participant directly raised the issue of the number of social researchers working in Hackney:
without wanting to sound awkward or anything, but we get a lot of people who come in and want to research Hackney, but what sort of legacy do they leave apart from wanting to come in and publish and then take to a different academic community?

But there are lots of groups which could benefit from access to research expertise that cannot pay for it.

The concern expressed here relates to the academic extraction of data from a particular place and population without longer-term reciprocity but it is also reflects an awareness that social research is a potentially valuable co-productive process and resource. This participant’s critique of the social research being undertaken in Hackney was not targeted at the project research team per se (and these were people who were willing to engage with our project) but that it was raised in the interview conversation is significant. This questioning of ‘what gets delivered back?’ from high levels of research activity in particular places and with particular populations reflects a concern with over-research as well as the key requirements of research ethics i.e. that social research should be a socially beneficial process. This awareness of social research extended into the confident and critical engagements we had with the policy and organisation related participants. While the challenges raised around disproportionate research have understandably problematised the direction of the research gaze on particular populations in places rather than on the places themselves, we suggest that these are co-constituted and the places in which research participants live also require an ethics of care and research responsibility.

Some reflections

Being attentive to situated and placed lives echoes concerns raised by earlier post-structuralist, feminist, anti-racist and participatory research critiques which set some of the agenda four decades ago. More recently these are developed through the ‘co-productive turn’ in mainstream academic research environments. The ‘understanding that useful and critical knowledge is dispersed throughout society and to seek to activate, expand and apply this knowledge to effect change [and] empower co-producers to shape the world in which they live’ (Bell and Pahl 2018: 107) is a fundamental building block in developing a more open and engaged approach to the practices of social research. There may be dangers of the translation and the depoliticisation of this commitment as co-production becomes incorporated and institutionalised. But at its heart co-production problematises social research processes and intentions and re-works research relationships. With its commitment to not doing research that is ‘about us without us’, and its emphasis on democratising the research process, de-centring the researcher and prioritising participants’ experience and knowledge, co-production can be seen to respond to and reflect the anti-racist critiques of social research. In contexts in which particular individuals, groups, communities and the places in which they live have a history of being stigmatised, marginalised or pathologised then research approaches which are orientated towards collaborative arrangements like these can shift research relationships into what Back and Sinha describe as being a more ‘sociable methods [which are] participatory and dialogic’ (2018).

The need to prioritise and cultivate multicultural research skills and competencies which are able (and adept) in making methods decisions and recognise increasingly ethnically diverse and socially differentiated populations within research design and collaborative data generation becomes profoundly important. Putting questions of race and cultural difference and intersectionality at the centre of research methods training and practice is part of the
decolonising process. To understand the real/unreal contradiction of race as a social set of relations given that ‘international belief in race as real [is what] makes race real in its social consequences’ (Bonilla-Silva and Zuberei 2008: 7) is why research on race and ethnicity needs to more than be simply listed as a sensitive research area in universities’ ethical approval processes and instead needs to be integral part of core social research methods literature as well as methods teaching and learning.

References


