

Critical Issues in Anti-racist Research Methodologies

AN INTRODUCTION

I would like to begin this introduction in a very unconventional way. I wish to thank the students in my graduate level course at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto for sharing their many ideas with me in class. These ideas have, over the years, been informed by thinking on anti-racist research. When I started thinking about this project and the possibilities of putting such a collection in print, I was moved by the knowledge and questions that I had encountered in my few years of teaching a course of this kind. While I was strengthened by the amount of past, current, and existing scholarship on anti-racism, I also felt that one of the means of moving the subject into other territories would be to produce a textbook that raises some key questions about anti-racist research. I have always sought and welcomed collaborative intellectual work and the opportunity to share thoughts and ideas with Gurpreet Johal, as co-editor of this collection has been extremely rewarding. Some of the views expressed in this introduction were presented in a keynote address to the Ryerson Polytechnic University, Spring Faculty Community Services (SRC) event on May 21, 1997, and I would like to thank the audience for their critical comments.

This introduction is purposely intended to raise questions rather than provide answers. Anti-racism studies have blossomed over the years with scholarship and political work reinforcing each other to cement anti-racist change, but how do we understand anti-racist research? How is anti-racist research methodology different from other methods of research investigation? What are the principles of anti-racism research? This edited collection attempts to provide some answers to these questions, and brings together works that examine the perils and desires of anti-racist research with a particular focus on the

notion of *difference* by seriously looking at the race, gender, class, and sexuality intersections/implications of educational research.

Anti-racist research places the minoritized at the center of analysis by focusing on their lived experiences and the “simultaneity of [their] oppressions” (Brewer, 1993, p. 16). The research purpose is to understand social oppression and how it helps construct and constrain identities (race, gender, class, sexuality), both internally and externally through inclusionary and exclusionary processes. People of color (e.g., black women) experience oppression in a way that is different both in substance and intensity. Anti-racism research is not about becoming located or situated in another’s lived experiences but is rather an opportunity for the researcher to critically engage his or her own experience as part of the knowledge search. While discussing such experiences in the research process, one must also ask, “how does this experience speak to me in terms of theorizing experiences and pursuing political action for change?” The belief in the power of ideas to change society requires that the anti-racist researcher explores ways and means of understanding the philosophy behind the social ideals and practices in which people are involved.

It goes without saying that an understanding of the simultaneity of oppression is essential if the educator/researcher is to understand the experience of oppression dealt with by minoritized individuals. The simultaneity of oppression always speaks directly to lived experience of the minoritized, but in order for this way of conceptualizing oppression to move beyond theory, it must inform practice through daily human [social] action, e.g., research, teaching). Research on race must touch on multiple subject identities and how these identities are intertwined, as well as how they inform political practice. Change in anti-racist attitudes depends on the ability to pursue a politics beyond our fragmented identities while concentrating on certain goals. The lessons of history suggest that in coalition building, when struggles have been fought, certain people will remain oppressed while others assume the mantle of power and privilege. Social-movement politics have also been known to ignore certain agendas and desires not deemed in the interest of their rank and file. These are the kinds of issues that prompt rethinking and revision of coalition politics to promote social change. There is strength in numbers, and this realization is important enough to cause anti-racist politics to cross borders and seek important allies.

It is important to reiterate that our goal is not to preach to anyone about the desires and perils of anti-racist work. In fact, we see ourselves as part of the topic of discussion, and bring with us ideas that are a reflection of our own individual and collaborative research practices. We present this discussion as a way to rethink collaboration and anti-racism research, and we begin by posing some

basic questions that drive the need to rethink such research. Our intention is not to offer answers to these fundamental questions, but rather, to pose them in a way that helps to reframe anti-racist practice. While our focus is on anti-racism, we believe the issues raised in this text span many diverse concerns of academic researchers and community workers interested in decolonizing research in the academy (i.e., schools, colleges, and universities) (see Smith, 1999).

There are varied discursive approaches to anti-racist research. For example, what are the specific epistemological, ontological, and axiological assumptions underlying anti-racist research? What are the specific methods called for in such research? What distinguishes anti-racist research from other social science research methodologies? How do we look at collaboration among anti-racism researchers (e.g., collaboration with/between/among research institutes, universities, and other centers of learning; collaboration among research teams from different academic disciplines; and collaboration between anti-racist-‘theorists’ and local communities outside of the academies)? What are the specific political projects for undertaking this form of research? In this collection, we focus on many of these issues as we seek to unravel the politics and intellectual agendas behind anti-racist research and research methodologies. A key focus of the discussion is on collaboration among academic researchers and the subjects of their study, local communities and research.

The pursuit of anti-racist research raises a host of complex theoretical and methodological issues. There is a vast array of competing interests, tensions, and contradictions in thinking through the power relations of knowledge production in the broader context of anti-racism (see also Bulmer and Solomos, 2004; Twine and Warren, 2000). Anti-racism is about power relations. Anti-racism discourse moves away from discussions of tolerating diversity to the pointed notion of difference and power. It sees race and racism as central to how we claim, occupy, and defend spaces. The task of anti-racism is to identify, challenge, and change the values, structures, and behaviors that perpetuate systemic racism and other forms of societal oppression. Specifically, and as many have pointed out, anti-racism discourse highlights persistent inequities in communities, focusing on relations of domination and subordination (Thomas, 1984; Lee, 1985; 1991; Walcott 1990; Dei, 1996). Thus anti-racism troubles the manifestation of the social problems as simply bias and discrimination rather than hatred, exclusion and violence (see Price, 1993; Dei and Callieste, 2000). Anti-racism perceives prejudice as an integral part of the social order and views the mechanism of redressing societal inequities as being fundamental structural change. Anti-racism problematizes the position that we

all start from a relatively level playing field, that we have access to similar resources, and that we have comparable values, aspirations, and concerns as far from the reality of those racially minoritized in our communities.

It is important to distinguish anti-racism from hegemonic notions of liberal multiculturalism. Liberal multiculturalism is an ideology that promotes cultural diversity as an intrinsic component of the social, political, and moral order. This ideology presents itself as a mosaic that cherishes difference and plurality and promotes an image of multiple, thriving, mutually respectful, and appreciative ethno-cultural communities. Liberal multiculturalism suggests that the primary issue of relevance in different cultural communities is that there is a lack of recognition of positive contributions, misunderstandings, and miscommunication. This is manifested in intolerance, and lack of goodwill among people. The primary mechanism of redress is education, cultural sensitivity, sharing and exchange. Within this paradigm, prejudice of individuals, rather than systemic inequity is the primary obstacle facing ethno-cultural communities. Perceived prejudices should be redressed through the language of democratic rights.

Anti-racism, on the other hand, suggests that the whole nation-building enterprise is suspect, as are assumptions underlying empathy, commonality, and goodwill. The Anti-Racism Secretariat (a government mandated body in the Ministry of Citizenship, responsible for development of policy on anti-racism initiatives in the province of Ontario) definition of anti-racism suggests that it is the practice of identifying, challenging, and changing the values, structures, and behaviors that perpetuate systemic racism. The discourse of anti-racism emphasizes persistent inequities among communities that are embedded in relations of domination and subordination. The primary issue is that of entrenched inequality and power imbalances. This is manifested in bias, discrimination, hatred, exclusion, and most importantly, violence. Mechanisms of redress outlined by anti-racism are fundamental structural and societal change. In this context, prejudice is perceived as an integral, rather than an anomalous, part of the social order.

Race, gender, class, and sexual identity consciousness influence what we see and interpret in race and anti-racism research work. Race and anti-racism studies, as a serious area of inquiry, present fundamental epistemological and theoretical challenges. Today anti-racism workers continue to search for appropriate ways to secure, interrogate, validate, affirm, and/or challenge public and commonsensical knowledge about race/and racism. Questions of ethics and human values continually resurface in anti-racist practice. Stanfield (1995a, 13) rightly observes that conventional research into race has been notorious for its passivity and degradation of racial minorities and particularly for its exclusion of researchers as subjects, from playing significant decision-making roles in

research projects involving members of their own communities. It is no secret that legitimacy is accorded to race research and scholarship when produced by members of the dominant group (see Fine, 1994a; Fine, 1994b, 80; Stanfield, 1995b, 26). There are emerging issues concerning the relevance and the application of anti-racist research, and the effects of race research on subjects (e.g., pain, suffering, and material costs).

An emerging concern for contemporary anti-racist research is to move beyond the bland politics of inclusion to a new politics of transparency and accountability. Critical academic researchers are taking responsibility for what they do or fail to do, while ensuring that their subjects are continually informed about the process, objective, and goals of their research. Embedded in this concern is anti-racist researchers' awareness of reactions to their work as they seek to rupture the status quo. Our theoretical conception and political praxis of engaging in critical research is anchored in an integrative anti-racism discursive framework, a recognition of the pervasiveness of power and its dominance in a racialized, gendered, and classed society. There is a powerful connection between race identity and knowledge production. Every researcher must acknowledge the crucial impact of race identity and social difference. Our subjective identities and political locations inform how we produce knowledge and come to interpret and understand the world. Along with this important knowledge, antiracist research must acknowledge the inherent asymmetrical power relations that are structured along lines of difference.

At the conceptual level, the notions of power, social politics, community, change become crucial in discussing anti-racist research. Importantly, anti-racist research must problematize colonial practices. An anti-colonial approach theorizes colonial and neo-colonial relations and the implications of imperial structures on processes of knowledge production and validation, the understanding of indigence, and the pursuit of agency, resistance, and subjective politics. The approach critiques colonial imposition, where *colonial* is understood to be imposed and dominating and not simply foreign or alien. Pursuing anti-racist research in an anti-colonial framework (Dei and Asgharzadeh, 2001) means to critique the "shark phenomenon," (the practice of seeing subjects as merely "objects and subjects" of raw data) and the researcher's role as collecting data and then "theorizing" elsewhere apart from the subjects. This practice seeks only to reproduce colonial and power relations. Anti-racism change requires that research and researchers see local peoples/subjects as theorists of their own everyday lives and practices. Local peoples live and create theory. They are creators of knowledge not simply subjects of study. For many local peoples, what is theoretical does not stand in opposition to what is pragmatic.