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White, like who? Temporality, contextuality and anti-racist social work education and practice

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Abstract

The last two decades have produced a variety of theoretical positions on race and power. This article presents an analysis of ‘identity’ in terms of how it has been conceptualized within the development of anti-racist social work education during this period. In doing such an analysis, I press for a more nuanced theorization of the relationship between race and identity, and argue that in order for anti-racist teaching to be meaningful and effective, conceptualizations of race must be temporal and contextual. I conclude by offering some questions for engaging with students in the development of a more critical understanding of identity.

Introduction

I arrive at this writing in a series of violent and unanticipated moments. Having relocated a few years ago from Toronto, Canada to South-West England, I was told within the first month of being here to, “go home Paki”. Ironically, born in England, and partly raised in London, I have in effect, come ‘home’. More recently I found myself in a violent encounter with several white males imitating a Chinese language (a familiar insult to Asians), while throwing their beer bottles at me. These two incidents, the reduction of my biography to a word that does not mirror my ethnicity and to a language that is incoherent, have provided a material and personal urgency to my theorizations of the role of identity in how anti-racist practices are currently conceptualized.

While such racialized acts are certainly not unimaginable in Toronto, the use of the word “Paki” seems “out of place”. Not once during ten years of living in Toronto was I ever called a “Paki”. I was called many other racialized names that are much closer to my ethnicity, but never a paki. Such a name reminds me of the fluidity of my own identity, while affirming that racialization processes are deeply contextual and metaphorical. Lynn’s study (2005) of racist graffiti substantiates that our knowledge and experiences are indeed rooted within the cultures and subcultures of the particular geographic area. Indeed, as I have been reminded in my move

to the UK, my identity is not simply inscribed within my own genetic formation, it is inscribed and thus lived, within the context of my environment.

Within social work, the last fifteen years have seen the development of a variety of positions on race and power by social work academics (Carniol, 1995; Dominelli, 1998; Ferguson, 2008; Fook, 2002; Healy, 2005; Thompson, 2006). Early writings defined identity as an active process concerned with classifying people, setting boundaries, and establishing an understanding about who is dominant/marginal, insider/outsider, and privileged/disadvantaged. Uma Narayan's *Working together across differences: Some considerations on emotions and political practice* (1988) and Peggy McIntosh's, *White Privilege: Unpacking the invisible knapsack* (1989) are well known examples of this kind of linear conceptualization. Both Narayan and McIntosh construct 'an identity' as a practice that is shaped on a relational and oppositional level, i.e. whilst interacting and being defined within fixed relations of power. This kind of construction remains common in social care literature (Ryde, 2009).

Such linear identarian practices and positions have been thoroughly problematized in the last two decades from a variety of disciplinary and theoretical perspectives. As Hall (1996) argued, being 'different' depends very much on the social, political and historical context one is working/living within. Hall's idea of identity as contextual and thus un-fixed or fluid has been mirrored and developed by a multiplicity of theorists 'outside' of social work, in particular those from postmodern and postcolonial argumentations (Bhabba, 1994; Butler, 1992; Hall, 1997; Spivak, 1990; Trinh, 1991). A defining element of these writings is the very notion that identity is contextual, such that race and other identifications operate within diverse geographic and political locations.

Fook, in her text *Social Work: Critical Theory and Practice* (2002), argues that identity can be socially ascribed or 'given'. She demonstrates that sometimes we do not have much choice over ascribed identities:

I can well remember my frustration and annoyance when I attended a workshop on cross-cultural counseling, run by a prominent white North American trainer, some years ago. He began the training by informing us that many people in traditional cultures have particular meanings attached to their names, so he thought it was a good idea to begin an interview by asking the meaning of a person's name. We then conducted role play interviews, starting with this question. I remember thinking I didn't have a clue what my name, 'Janis', meant. Even worse, I couldn't care less... Without waiting to find out who I was, in my own terms, the interviewer had assumed my difference and related to me in those terms. He wasn't concerned about finding out *who I thought I was*, only initially relating in terms of *what he thought he saw* (Fook, 2002, p. 81, italics authors own).

This practice of being 'given an identity' is evident to me in completing social care and state forms where in response to 'what is your ethnic origin' I am 'British Other' in the UK, whereas in Hong Kong I am 'Mixed', while in Canada I can choose to be either 'British Isles' or 'Other European'. Whilst the meaningfulness of identity as a category is open for questioning, it is indeed this very sociality of identity—this occurrence in the socio-political realm—that makes

‘identity’ important in social work education. For example, it is key to discussions of equal access and delivery of health and social services. I will return to a closer discussion of ‘identity’ within social work education further on.

Such reminders of contextuality that I describe have also appeared in my teaching in a Social Work programme. In grading students’ work, I have noticed that practice educators and assessors are keen to ensure that students self-identify their ethnicity. I believe this gestures to their knowledge of the prevalence of racism in the South-West of England and their commitment to address racism, as well as their understanding that the majority of social work students are ‘British’ ‘white’. And while researchers have demonstrated that social work students must work hard to develop culturally sensitive practice techniques (Butler, Elliot & Stopard, 2003), contemporary research and literature also evidences a prevailing debate over the worth of anti-racism standards and frameworks in social work practice and education (Danso, 2009; Healy, 2005; Humphries, 2004; Jelley et al, 2008; McLaughlin, 2005; Millar, 2008; Sakamoto & Pitner, 2005). In addition, there have been extensive contributions of postmodern theorizations by social work writers (Brown, 1994; Fook, 2002; Healy, 2005; Rossiter, 2000), which problematize identity in social work practice and in social work education. And so, I have been surprised by the privileging of identity in attending to racism; and in turn, the desire to create an anti-racist white subject.

Of interest to me, since I have moved to the South-West of England, is students’ struggle to understand what anti-racism has to do with ‘whiteness’. For example, in my methods class students often inquire how to apply anti-racist practice to service users who are white, ‘like me’. Such conceptualizations of anti-racism and anti-oppressive practice frameworks which rest upon an Other are well documented (Mercer, 1995; Razack, 2004; Said, 1979; Trinh, 1989). And in turn, these conceptualizations shape anti-racist education (including pedagogical practices) within an identitarian understanding of the self. In other words, this question of ‘white like me’ cannot be separated from students being asked to self-identify as ‘white’.

As I will discuss in this article, the notion that whiteness is homogenized and oppositional is highly problematic. For example, providing an analysis of the experiences of Irish migrants to Britain, Garrett (2002) reminds us that ‘whiteness’ was never cohesive and has always been part of the racialized landscape of Britain. Kyambi (2005) describes the contemporary demographics of the UK:

the arrival of economic migrants, asylum seekers, international students, and, most recently, workers from the new member states of the European Union (EU), has resulted in a rapidly changing map of diversity across the UK (2005, p. 9).

Within the materiality of my own experiences of being racialized in the South-West of England, I am interested in the students’ struggle to articulate whiteness, especially in a moment when the ‘whiteness’ of Britain is shifting, if not expanding. In this political moment it is perhaps paradoxical, that anti-racist teaching is structured such that the articulation of an anti-racist social worker is reliant on the Other. And so, I find promise in the possibility of this political moment for the reconceptualizing of anti-racist social work education.

As a starting point for the project of reconceptualization, I argue in this paper that social work educators must contextualize and temporalize whiteness as a political and cultural concept rather than one of identarian value. As an example of the centrality of contextuality and temporality, I begin by describing the socio-political context that I am currently teaching within. It is my argument that the contemporary socio-political context reaffirms identity-based anti-racist education as burdensome. I then demonstrate how an identarian position within anti-racist education functions to eschew the 'whiteness' in the UK while creating a neo-liberal (and potentially tokenistic) anti-racist social work subject.

Socio-political context

The South-West region is approximately 300 kilometres from end to end, with a population of five million and is primarily rural. Sandford (2006) describes the region as isolated from the economic centre (London) and the industrial centres (English North and Midlands). The two counties in the South-West are Cornwall and Devon. The city of Plymouth, located in Devon, borders on Cornwall. Plymouth is distinctly and metaphorically described as "across the border". A large proportion of students in our undergraduate social work programme are from Cornwall. Upon qualifying, an equally large percentage will practice in Cornwall.

Cornwall's Gross Domestic Product is approximately 65-70 per cent of the British average, and as such, it is the poorest county in England. As Sandford describes,

Cornwall suffers from many of the symptoms of peripherality: poor transport links, low skills and education, extractive industries to external markets, tourism and seasonal unemployment, correspondingly poor health, creating a vicious circle of underinvestment both from the public and private sectors (2006, p. 85).

Under the Central Government plan launched in 1999, asylum seekers who arrived in England were "dispersed" to geographical areas that were not accustomed to immigration. According to the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR), these locations received relatively large numbers of new migrants (2007). Plymouth has been described by Butler as one of these areas:

[Plymouth] has been a dispersal area for years for families and single men seeking asylum. A failure of strategic planning has led to a lack of 'clustering', making it difficult to develop a cultural or ethnic community to support newcomers. Currently, at least twenty-five different first languages are spoken and families' countries of origin are diverse (2005, p. 148)

People seeking asylum are just one group of so-called 'new migrants'. The other groups that have re-shaped the demographics of many cities in the UK are refugees, as well as other migrant groups who have come to the UK within the last ten years. Of particular relevance to the South-West are migrants from the eight central and eastern European countries that joined the European Union in 2004. Plymouth has seen an increase in Eastern European migrants since this time, notably people from Poland who visually, are predominately white. Certainly in the

South-West, the opening of Polish and Russian restaurants, foodshops, as well as traditional Polish food being sold in the local supermarkets can mark the number of Polish migrants. In addition, the number of Polish and other Eastern European taxi drivers, restaurant servers, and construction workers is evident in everyday life in Plymouth.

Historically, Plymouth has been a naval base, surrounded by rural village communities, with few established non-white ethnic communities or pre-existing refugee communities (Butler, 2005; Cunliffe & Bahiraey, 2006). As a predominantly white area, the Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) population was 0.6 % in the 2001 census, and racism and social isolation for such individuals is described as “severe” (Bright, cited in Butler, 2005, p. 148). The everyday experiences of racism in Cornwall and Devon are captured by the work of local groups such as the Racial Equality Council and the Monitoring Group, as well as a local police racial hate crime unit.

Cunliffe and Bahiraey (2006) argue that the socio-political environment of both Plymouth and the South West contribute to the difficult experience of new migrants in finding jobs for example. As they describe,

When questioned about their impressions of the host area, a large number of comments made by [asylum seekers and refugees] in Plymouth reflect perceptions of negativity if not racism in the area. Frequent references are made to their inability to obtain employment and the frustrations of being denied jobs that reflect their previous qualifications and experience (p. 132).

IPPR research (2007) indicates that there is a perception that people seeking asylum are negatively impacting on jobs, wages and public services. This ‘threat’ to the standard of living constructs a socio-political climate where the welfare state is seen as a problem, in that it cares for, and is seen to advantage, those who are ‘not from here’. The IPPR’s research evidences that this perceived threat extends broadly in terms of recipients, such that negative public attitudes to those seeking asylum cut across all ethnic minority communities. For example, participants who were Asian or black but not asylum seekers were perceived to be migrants, and as such experienced hostility as a result of this perception (IPPR, 2007). The label of ‘migrant’ and ‘asylum seeker’ and the perception of who can occupy these categories has become a political term for the Other. This public attitude, which rests in public discourse, shapes the conditions that find me being told to “go home Paki”. Significantly, this discrimination toward the Other extends quite broadly racially. It includes those who are visually white, such as white Irish people, and in this contemporary UK moment, Eastern Europeans who are predominately visibly white and portrayed on a daily basis by the British media as pilfering the welfare state. Contributing to this public discourse of the Other is a legal discourse that refutes the racialization of white migrants.

Under the Race Relations (Amendment) Act 2000, asylum seekers, refugees and economic migrants are not categorized as ‘racial groups’. Legally, this means that within public authorities, (such as City Councils, where most social workers in the UK will be employed) refugees, asylum seekers, and white migrants do not fall under the remit of ‘race relations’.

'Race relations' is conceptualized as relations between established white communities and established ethnic minority communities. This conceptualization of social policy based on visibility, frames discussions, and actions around race and racism within oppositional categories of 'black' and 'white'.

Such a racialized binary, evident in policy, and thus appearing in many practice discourses, does not accurately represent contemporary 'race relations' in the UK. The IPPR state that a 'black and white' perspective on race relations is, "out of step with the UK's new diversity and the tensions arising from it tend to divide communities in increasingly complex ways" (2007, p. 6).

Since moving to the UK, I have been conditioned to the term "Black Minority Ethnic" or "BME". It is a term used in government literature, as well as statutory and non-statutory social work settings to identify service users, carers, and employees. I have noticed it is used flexibly and broadly to include those who are not visibly black but definitely not white. So in this way, as a discourse it reiterates an ethnic majority that is 'white'. While intended to be inclusive of all 'visible minorities' other than 'black', it remains a conceptualization of race within the binary of black and white. And as such, it works to foster, rather than resist, linear identitarian politics. As Garrett writes,

This approach is founded on implicit ideas about British identity and erroneously suggests that white ethnicities are homogeneous, unified and cleanly demarcated from a (new) black presence (2002, p. 477).

In this homogenizing of whiteness through the conceptualization of BME, whiteness remains the unspoken cultural norm (Dyer, 2002), based on identity as a visual concept (Mercer, 1995). Several writers in social work have cautioned us not to conceptualize identities based on visible perceptions. For example, Harrison (2006; 2007) asks us to "broaden our lens" and to examine the role of language in the shaping of identity, race, and racism. Garrett (2002) implores us to deconstruct the conceptual assumptions at the centre of the black and white binary, and documents that in children and families services Irish people are often omitted regarding culturally appropriate services. He states,

...underpinning social work's approach to questions of 'race' and ethnicity is an historical perception of 'whiteness' as a universally dominant, homogeneous and static social category (p. 481).

And, Phillips (2006) reminds us how social workers in Canadian child welfare agencies participated in the construction of Jews and other Eastern European immigrants as the racialized Other. Phillips argues that in determining 'the best interests of the child',

Fluid and flexible notions of fitness, like race, were mobilized to justify the exclusion of some form of potential parenthood and, with it, their exclusion from citizenship and national belonging (p. 361).

Together, these historical and contemporary examples gesture to the challenge of teaching social work within the discursive limits of legal and public terminology and discourses. Twelve years ago, Singh (1996) called on social work academics to ensure that our responses to race be continually attentive:

Since racism never stands still and affects different people in different ways, anti-racist responses must always be contingent in time and space (p. 49).

Macey and Moxon (1996) and Gould (1996) have also made a similar argument suggesting that any understanding of anti-racism requires an analysis of contemporary social relations. Indeed, the knowledge that ‘whiteness’ is heterogeneous must be accounted for in any anti-racist theorization. Otherwise whiteness, as a categorization, does not reflect the temporal/political moment in which social work practice is situated. In effect, it becomes a meaningless category, emptied of any political realities and intentions.

Anti-racist social work education

The call in the early 1990's for social work to include the experiences of those marginalized (Carniol, 1995; Dominelli, 1988; Hammer and Statham, 1999; Singh, 1996) was loud and insurgent, and fundamentally altered social work education. Structural and feminist educators and practitioners worked to ‘include’ anti-racist content, mainly through the use of stories of experiences of racism. The shift in social work education to listen more closely, tightly, and truthfully to Others’ experiences was based on the politics of identities of gender, race, class, and sexuality (Carniol, 1995; Morris, 1993; Park, 2005; Phillips, 1996; Soifer, 1991).

From this conceptualization of identity—what I refer to as an identarian politic—a multiplicity of pedagogical methods was developed. For example, Morrison Dore argued for students to compare their beliefs with those of a client “of a different ethnic origin ...” (1994, p. 104). Chau (1990) wrote about ethnic self profiling exercises while Latting (1990) worked with “extortion” methods to consider “how to help students admit and confront their own internal biases” (p. 45). Many of these pedagogical techniques reflect my experience of participating in UK social work education thus far, and they assume that the naming of identity and/or personal bias will operate as a reactionary or corrective measure to racism. Certainly, the practice of ‘hit and run’ theatre and drama workshops that rely on a definitive ‘Other’ are popular in social work departments, including my own.

The critiques of such identarian practices in pedagogy have been multiple. Primarily, foregrounding individual identities is problematic; because individualism is fore-grounded (and believed in) when its background is stereotypified (Morimura, 2003; Trinh, 1989). Working within identarian practices that authorize experiences as truth (in part an ‘essential identity’), allows social workers to construct some/one with an identity (ourselves and service users) as though that identity were ‘real’ and represented that ‘reality’ (Phillips, 1996). In a profession that works to ‘do good’, this is a troubling conceptualization because social workers are situated and inscribed within relations of dominance/power, including the right to ‘give’ an identity, the right to ‘have’ an identity, the right to ‘speak’ (with) an identity. And in social work education

specifically, particular identities have historically and materially come to matter—such that naming whiteness (usually one's own) currently means one is 'a reflective practitioner'. As such, these invocations to experience as a standpoint ('white' and the Other) that is incontestable and truthful, dilute the critical force of histories of difference that should offer social work practitioners moments of opposition in building collective actions. Identity politics precludes the possibility of identity (or self-definition of points of identification) as constituted by resistance and transgression, and as Mandell points out anti-oppression literature in general "tended to be more helpful at identifying and critiquing ways in which social work is embedded in systems of control than it has at offering us ways to establish ethical practices that promote social justice" (2007, p. 3). In addition, identity politics glosses over a number of different forms of affiliation, such as belonging and senses of communities that shape identity (Phillips, 1996), and according to Okitkpi and Aymer (2008), "strip anti-discriminatory practice of its political edge" (p. 38) in recognizing that there are "as many differences within groups as there are between groups" (p. 29).

And so, when anti-racist education privileges identity and thus situates people or groups in abstraction from engaged knowledges on historical racialization patterns, political ideologies, and economics, the very materiality of racism is decontextualized and detemporalized. In effect, the naming of a 'white identity' outside a more engaged discussion renders racism invisible and unarticulated. As an example of this within the functions of a nation-state, Mackey (2002) argues that identity, particularly the centrality of naming identity is used in Canada as shorthand for the politics of difference (including racism), while in the US context Park (2005) argues that identity is a stand-in for 'culture'.

Returning to the question of students working with service users 'like me', identarian conceptualizations as the frame for anti-racist education work to make whiteness visible and particular, but by doing so, the anti-racist social worker situates her/himself as a humanist (benevolent and reflective) subject. Such a modernist agenda centres a socially constructed concept (that of identity as 'real'), and in turn, creates a white anti-racist subject: this subject then works to create a 'counter whiteness' by disconnecting themselves from whiteness as privileged. Wiegman (1999) describes this as "a paradox of particularity" that serves to create a neo-liberal subject. Given this, it is important in social work education to differentiate between a racial identity (whiteness) and political identifications (an anti-racist subject); however, when such an identification (that is political) rests on an identity (that is fixed, biological, cultural or visual); there is a contradiction that must be accounted for. The social constructionist project of a white anti-racist subject in social work education rests on this contradiction. I will return to this point again.

As I have noted, identity and the self-naming of whiteness, remains compelling. I have often been told that those arguing for identarian pedagogies are 'just not up to date'. However, I do not think that such advocates are 'stuck in time' but that their leaning into identity is a political reaction to what has been significant to the politics of anti-racism in social work education in the UK. Humphries (1997) traces this nicely and passionately for us. Others have also written about this. In the mid-1990s the Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work (CCETSW), "rescinded its allegiance to an antiracist perspective and moved

towards multiculturalism” (Keating, 2000, p. 77). Collins, Gutridge, James, Lyn & Williams (2000, 31) argue that this change in the 1990s shifted the discourse of ‘anti-oppressive’ into an ‘equal opportunities framework’. In 2002, the General Social Care Council, which succeeded the CCETSW, produced codes of practice that did not (re-) establish anti-racist practice. Many academics have presented this as a pivotal moment in UK social work education and I believe this history has contributed to the desire for race to matter once again in educating social workers.

It has also been noted that identarian practices have resurged in the focus on reflection (Healy, 2005). I would argue that an anti-oppressive competence that rests on identarian principles (i.e. ‘are you white?’) is no more than a performance in self-reflexivity and does little towards the transformation of oppressive social structures. I also believe that identarian practices seeping—untheorized—into social work education is the result of an under-conceptualization of (anti-)racism, rather than an expression of critical reflection. For example, Fook and Gardner in their book, “Practising critical reflection” (2007), demonstrate how critical reflection can work to break down the reliance on a humanist assumption of the self as a rational agent of reflexive practices. Critical reflection also centres relationality and contextuality (Fook, 2002; White, Fook & Gardner, 2006) and thus pushes against subjects constructed within binaries, such as those assembled as BMEs.

Whiteness Studies and Social Work

Returning to the students’ question about working with people who are ‘white like me’ (which rides on the contradiction between identity as political and as biological), I am interested in how we might understand an anti-racist subject as a more active political subject (rather than an identarian-based, neo-liberal subject). Specifically, is it possible to imagine an anti-racist white subject who at once, can understand and theorize the complexity of whiteness in contemporary social work practice? Frankenberg’s book, “The social construction of whiteness: White women, race matters” (1993), based on in-depth interviews with white women focuses on the advantages that whiteness holds even when women define themselves as anti-racist. Frankenberg works to pull apart any notion of a white essentialized relation. And so her work offers some interesting reflections on the meaning of an anti-racist white social worker struggling to understand people ‘like me’.

Frankenberg (1993) argues that whiteness has three interconnected “dimensions” – a location with structural advantages, a standpoint from which white people look at themselves, others and society, and a set of unnamed cultural practices. Certainly, Frankenberg’s work can be criticized for reiterating a purely visual framing of race (in terms of her participants) and therefore whiteness as privileged, however conceptually, Frankenberg shifts the binary question of “who is powerful” to questions regarding the processes by which subjects are constituted as effects of power, i.e. “how does whiteness work?”. Such a question acknowledges and attends to the notion of identity as fluid—recognizing temporality and contextuality.

Considering structural advantage, Frankenberg (1993) locates whiteness not in the physiological reality of white skin but in complex socio-economic processes and practices:

fluidity is a core element of her conceptualization. For example, despite the rise in immigration and the accompanying racial diversity, the increased regulation of the borders of nation-states has kept 'whiteness' privileged in material ways. This has occurred at the same time (in the UK) as the economic position of certain countries, such as Poland and Bulgaria, cause a shift in cross-border employment that dramatically altered local demographics. And so, for social workers paying attention to structural complexities can allow us to understand racialized processes that are mediated by cultural/historical circumstances. It is these processes according to Frankenberg (1993) which produce and position subjects, and it is an understanding of these processes that will allow social workers to position themselves in relation to institutions and service users that appear 'like us'. As Craig et al. (2007) reminds us in their report, *Contemporary slavery in the UK*:

To understand the UK as merely one site within which a series of dynamic processes occur, often involving chains or groups of actors that might touch on the political, social or economic interests of the UK or its geographical territory. ... It is increasingly impossible to understand modern forms of slavery without this international context, particularly as global migration becomes feasible for more people (p. 24).

Frankenberg's (1993) discussion of whiteness as a standpoint raises an interesting question about how we interrogate whiteness in a discipline in which negotiating relationality is understood to be a skill. Standpoint epistemology is based on the assumption that peoples' experiences are their 'ways of knowing', and so from Frankenberg's perspective this epistemic knowledge is what allows whiteness to be adopted as an unmarked, neutral category—a way of seeing the world. Of course this way of 'seeing' is related to the global conversations I mention above, such that in a post-modern moment the tension of relations in experience itself can be reframed as a process of negotiating through relations of global migration production. That is, 'seeing' is situated in relation to material, economic, and social-geographical realities. It is on this point that recent authors have engaged with Frankenberg's arguments (Brewster, 2005; Wigman, 1999).

Finally, on culture, the consideration of whiteness as a cultural practice fascinates in many ways. Having recently moved to the UK, the understanding I hear amongst students, but also amongst researchers, suggests that whiteness and Britishness are somehow aligned—identity and nationhood meet in culture. Henderson and McEwen (2005) compared national identities within Canada and the UK, and argue that in the 1980s, "the essence of Britishness was redefined as self-reliance, thrift, enterprise, and personal responsibility—the essence of Thatcherism" (p. 184). Recent research on such a national identity demonstrates that "successful integration was interpreted as the assimilation of migrants into a 'British' way of life (IPPR, 2007, p. 22). And yet,

Despite this, there was no clear sense of what constituted 'English culture'. Participants mentioned Christianity, Christian festivals, the English language and the St. George's flag, but also acknowledged that few of these characteristics actually characterised their lives (IPPR, 2007, p. 22).

Indeed a discursive examination of documentary photography from 1979-1989 concluded that:

‘Perhaps the most recent shift in British consciousness in recent years has been ... challenged assumptions not only about the nature of British society but even what is means to be “British”’ (cited in Howells, 2002, p. 107).

In this contemporary moment, Britishness is discursively linked with ‘whiteness’, in that ‘British’ is used rhetorically to define the Other by contrast. Thus Frankenberg’s (1993) point about culture as defining whiteness is well made in aiding a conceptualization of a white anti-racist social work subject. As Popsecu (2006) argues in his research on architecture and space, “the worry of losing something – a tradition, a way of life, a culture – indicated that temporality is key to defining British” (p. 199).

Frankenberg’s (1993) work, alongside other scholars in the emerging discipline of Whiteness Studies (Ahmed, 2007; Brewster, 2005; Stokes, 2001; Westcott, 2004; Wigman, 1999) is useful in pointing out that despite social work’s claim to be anti-oppressive, race is underconceptualized and without a more thorough examination of whiteness—structure, standpoint, and culture—anti-racist education has lost a viable political intention. Anti-oppressive education must work not just to name whiteness but to examine how whiteness works. Frankenberg’s work suggests that identity can be useful as an entry point to discussing established, taken-for-granted knowledge, but that educators must work to ensure that the engagement is also contextual and temporal. This includes the possibility that ‘whiteness’ may not be a useful category of identification at all.

By looking at the rational humanist subject that is at the centre of Frankenberg’s (1993) deconstructive work (that I would argue is the same subject at the centre of identarian-based anti-racist education) we can begin to consider the full dimensions of whiteness. Such attempts (as noted in the questions in Table 1) will allow us to get at positionalities that can enable social work students to understand how oppositional subjects (such as those resisting social workers) can emerge in the complex interplay of shifting relations of power—identities, political positions, institutional limitations. Although whiteness is globally oppressive, it is an identity that can be negotiated individually and specifically within a social work moment. It is not essential and fixed. While naming identity attends to a particular political agenda, the theoretical conditions and moves we make in doing so are also central to how we assign meaning to our relations, particularly across racial differences that are often viewed as divisions in building therapeutic relations and solidarity in social work practice.

1. How is your ethnic identity important or relevant to how you think about yourself? How has this changed over time? And with locations (if you have moved for example)?
2. How do you understand your identity when:
you are at home with your family?
you are at work or university?
you are out with friends?
your ethnic identity is being undermined?
3. Why do you think of yourself as [White English]? Specifically, what characteristics define your ethnicity (e.g., food, language, music etc.)? How have these characteristics changed over the last 5, 10 years? In reaction to what?
4. How is your ethnic identity related to how you practice social work?
5. How do you think of yourself when you:
work with a service user who you think is the same ethnicity as you?
learn that they are not the same ethnicity as you, after initially thinking that they were?
6. How is it relevant in your practice learning setting? (e.g. geographic area?)
How is it relevant to the service user groups?
7. How does [whiteness] work in this particular social work relationship?

Table 1: Questions for engagement on the relational elements of identity

Conclusions

Teaching race and anti-racism remains situated on politically contested terrain and, as Heron (2006) describes, it is “a perennial problem for the social work profession” (p. 2). I would describe it less as a problem and more as suspect—that is, anti-racist education must be continually and thoroughly conceptualized. And as I have argued in this paper, anti-racist education that relies on identarian principles is decontextualized and detemporalized. Traditionally, students are asked, ‘how do you define your ethnicity or what ethnic group do you belong to?’ In Table 1 I suggest some questions that open engagement about race as contextual and temporal—these questions are of course starting points only to a much broader discussion about the very meaningfulness of ‘identity’ as a category within social work practice.

Identity is a site of politics, but it is not a site of explanation; nor should it be a definition of competence. Similarly, as Frankenberg (1993) reminds us, the naming of one’s identity cannot be a stand-in for a complex discussion of culture and structure and power relations.

Certainly, there are other important influences, which I have not discussed, such as the modernization agenda for social work, competency-based requirements, and an increase in international student placements.

I am conscious of the need in the current political environment to promote an argument for identities to matter. It is a compelling and coherent politic that rests within the wish to ensure social work students work to resist individual and structural oppression. And based on my experience of living in the UK, I am struck by the material and emotional effects of racism as it rests on my visibly Asian body. Yet the problems raised by using identity as a pedagogical tool, cannot be underlined enough. Making identity the central point for anti-racist conversation arrests any examination of the actual conceptual system itself—we do not see its reliance on the Other and we cannot see how this Other is, at times, erased because they look ‘like us’. Categories of identity and suppositions about what these categories might mean in practice, how they operate in policies and how they create a service user population are both conceptual and real problems. The theorists I have discussed in this paper ask us to explore processes and practices by which identifications and indeed identity, come to matter. Doing so will involve a continual conceptualization of anti-racist education as a practice that also rests, historically and currently, on bodies that are potentially ‘like us’.

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