Concepts of Race and Racism and Implications for OHRC Policy

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ABSTRACT

Frances Henry reviews the origins of the concept of race and reviews models of racism. She focuses primary attention on contemporary theories of racism that highlight ideological notions of the 'Other', the role of "difference" and "othering" and their representation in terms of whiteness and blackness. She argues that human rights commissions need to recognize newer theories in their enforcement and policy work.

Although 'race' as a description of the physical condition probably dates back to the dawn of the human species, most scholars agree that it was primarily through European expansion in the 16th to the 19th century that the front and centre position of 'race' as a physical descriptor emerged. It was when European colonizers, whose aim was mainly to seek out valuable primary products such as sugar, tin, rubber and the like, came into contact with 'native' populations who were 'people of colour' that racism became a dominant force in western society. In order to maintain hegemonic control of these populations, they were defined as inferior human beings primarily because of their different cultural practices as well as their not being White, the desired and 'normal' European colour. Pushing such people to the margins did not, however, stop European men from sexually mixing with local women producing, wherever colonialism prospered, a so-called 'mixed' race of people. Thus, race, the biological descriptor was constructed in racism and became a major factor in discriminating between people. Colonial ideology was rapidly disseminated through Europe and other Europeanized areas such as North America thereby spreading the doctrines of alleged racial inferiority.

Definition of Race

In attempting to define "race", Dobzhansky (1946) states that:

> "Races are defined as populations differing in the incidence of certain genes but actually exchanging or potentially able to exchange genes across the boundaries (usually geographic) that separates them."

Here race refers to the inherited characteristics in a common gene pool or mating population. Race is conceived as a biological, genetically determined concept. However, this scientific concept has been increasingly challenged. First, it has been argued that the continued use of the term 'race' exacerbates the problems of racism. As a result, some African Americans want to substitute colour or 'colourism' because skin colour is the most obvious sign of difference. Second, others challenge race from the perspective of the increased 'hybridity' (Bhabha, 1994) or racial mixing brought about by increasing globalization and the migration of people. In this context identity becomes very subjective especially because racism denies such people their white parentage or heritage. Since mixed race persons are defined by their darker skin colour not their ethnicity the concept of 'race' looses much of its validity. Lastly, the most important challenge to the use of the concept of race is, however that it is not biological difference as such that creates racism but its social construction.

Despite these challenges the concept of race is still useful mainly because it promotes racism – which is what the Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC) and anti-racists the world over are trying to control. 'Race' is a biological reality which leads to the perception of difference which leads to racism. The theoretical underpinnings of the relationship between race and the construction of racism are complex and have important policy implications.

Models of Racism

There are basically three models of how race came to be constructed as racism

a) Origin Model

The first model goes back to the origin: that is, the relationship to capitalist expansion and European colonialism and the meeting of people other than Europeans. While it is not necessary to dwell in detail on these historical factors, it is

critically important to consider that it was primarily in these earlier centuries that the construction of 'difference' became an issue.

b) Individual and Institutional Models

This model is the most closely related to the work of the OHRC because it deals with forms of racial discrimination in institutions and especially the workplace. Ideas about individual, structural, and cultural disadvantage have become more and more central in the discourse of 'race relations', especially in the United States. These are also the forms of racism that frame the background to the Ontario Human Rights Code that regulates the OHRC's work and are the forms of racism that are most often accepted as indicators of discrimination.

It will be useful therefore to review in some detail some of the forms of racism that are implied in this model.

Individual Racism

Individual racism involves both the attitudes held by an individual and the overt behaviour prompted by those attitudes. The attitudes are often obvious: extremely intolerant, bigoted individuals tend to be proud of their attitudes and articulate them overtly and publicly. However, in a society such as Canada's most people are uncomfortable about expressing their attitudes openly because these attitudes run counter to prevailing norms. But, they may show their attitudes by practicing racial discrimination.

The Forms of Racism

Type	Manifestations
Individual	Attitudes, everyday behaviour
Institutional/systemic	Policies and practices of an organization, rules woven into a social system
Cultural/ideological	Values embedded in dominant culture

From Henry, Tator, et. al. *The Colour of Democracy: Racism in Canadian Society*. 2002, Harcourt, Toronto. 3rd edition in press

Everyday Racism

Everyday racism involves the many and sometimes small ways in which racism is experienced by people of colour in their interactions with the dominant White group. It expresses itself in glances, gestures, forms of speech, and physical movements. Sometimes it is not even consciously experienced by its perpetrators, but it is immediately and painfully felt by its victims — the empty seat next to a person of colour, which is the last to be occupied in a crowded bus; the slight movement away from a person of colour in an elevator; the over-attention to the Black customer in the shop; the inability to make direct eye contact with a person of colour; the racist joke told at a meeting; and the ubiquitous question "Where did you come from?"

Institutional and Systemic Racism

Institutional racism is manifested in the policies, practices, and procedures of various institutions, which may, directly or indirectly, consciously or unwittingly, promote, sustain, or entrench differential advantage or privilege for people of certain races.

Institutional racism generally encompasses overt individual acts of racism to which there is no serious organizational response, such as discriminatory hiring decisions based on the employer's bias. It also includes organizational policies and practices that, regardless of intent, are directly or indirectly disadvantageous to racial minorities, such as the lack of recognition of foreign credentials or the imposition of inflated educational requirements for a position.

Systemic racism, although similar to institutional racism, refers more broadly to the laws, rules, and norms woven into the social system that result in an unequal distribution of economic, political, and social resources and rewards among various racial groups. It is the denial of access, participation, and equity to racial minorities for services such as education, employment, and housing. Systemic racism is manifested in the media by, for example, the negative representation of people of colour, the erasure of their voices and experiences, and the repetition of racist images and discourse.

Ideological Theories of the 'Other'

For many modern neo-Marxist theorists, especially those influenced by postmodernist and poststructuralist paradigms, racism is best understood by theorizing about 'difference' and 'othering'. In fact, "the construction of difference" and the "process of assigning value to difference" are central to the understanding not only of racism, but many other forms of oppressive beliefs (Rothenberg, in Harris: 1998:281).

Difference can be expressed in several ways. For example, the most common is the belief that the 'races' or 'sexes' differ in their essential natures – this basically biological influenced belief leads to the common stereotypes that Blacks, for example, are less intelligent, are by nature lazy, and other such stereotypes. Another form is the notion that 'races' differ by morality and ethics, which lead to stereotypes that Blacks are promiscuous and, more recently, are disposed to criminal activity. Finally, difference can by defined by culture, values, and norms, which lead to the stereotype that Blacks come from inferior cultural backgrounds. Needless to say, all of these notions of difference are based on the erroneous belief in what has been called 'essentialism' – namely that differences in the human species are natural, biological, immutable and that they form the 'essential' nature of various groups.

Difference as it relates to racism (and sexism) is founded on the biological paradigm, but there have been several attempts to mitigate its effects. For example, the notion of 'separate but equal' that structured race relations in the U.S. for many years contends that providing separate facilities carries no evaluative judgments but is simply an attempt to provide equal facilities for everyone. More serious attempts to reduce emphasis on the role of biology have led to the pre-eminence of ethnicity/ethnic origin as a theoretical paradigm. This was and to a considerable extent still is prominent in many social scientific thinking.

Another major ideological component of racism relates to the ways in which people perceived to be 'different' are also constructed as 'the Other'. The concept originated in

the interaction between colonizer and colonial and is prominent in the literature on post-colonialism (Said, 2003; Bhabha, 1994). In many ways, the concept of the Other is similar to stereotyping but it carries larger and more symbolic meanings. Jordanova provides an all-encompassing definition of the process of othering in stating that it is: "the distancing of what is peripheral, marginal and incidental from a cultural norm…" (in Pickering, 2001). The process of othering is also a denial of history; it presents a barrier to change and can be understood as a myth. Marginalizing others places them out of the bounds of mainstream history; it mythologizes them as culturally, intellectually and morally inferior and so robs millions of people of their identities and their very personhood.

Thus one of the most critical components of modern or new racism is that it is based on an ideological construction of difference and othering. In combination with prevailing dominant white hegemonic power, racism becomes a commanding strategy for maintaining asymmetrical power relations or the status quo.

The Role of Representation

How is difference and othering manifested in contemporary societies that are regulated by human rights codes and charters, anti-hate legislation and the like, and whose governments at least nominally subscribe to values of equity, equality and justice?

Hall and his colleagues as early as 1978 recognized that representation and meaning was the key to understanding how difference was conceptualized in post modern societies. Systems of representation are the cultural circuits through which meanings are transmitted. The practice of representation means to embody concepts, ideas and emotions in a symbolic form that can be transmitted and meaningfully interpreted. Some important systems of representation include the media in all its forms; especially television and the print media; films and videos, music lyrics, museum exhibitions and, in fact, in all areas of society characterized by 'text and talk'. White people, their attitudes and behavior are represented as normal and natural whereas people of colour and other disadvantaged groups are often represented in negative and even hostile ways. Thus, in all forms of representation, whiteness is normative whereas blackness is marginalized and 'othered'. Racialized ideologies and representations are reflected in the collective belief systems of the predominantly white hegemonic culture; they are woven into the laws, language, rules, norms and values of Canadian society (Goldberg, 1993; Henry et al, 2000; Dei, 2004).

Implications for the OHRC

The OHRC needs a more sophisticated understanding of how racism works in postmodern societies like ours, and this enhanced understanding should be used to frame a policy statement. Simply basing its work on the presence or absence of racism as usually defined in very overt ways is no longer sufficient. Jokes, offensive language, physical assaults and the like are still very important indicators of racism and it remains important to continue investigating and solving issues around structural and systemic racism as discussed above. However, as racism is now manifested in so many coded and subtle forms, the OHRC must extend its understanding to comprehend these new forms. Racism needs to be understood not as an aberrant behaviour or set of deviant attitudes on the part of a deviant individual within a system – a rotten apple supervisor or manager – but as a far more complex set of behaviours. Subtle forms of racism exists in the normative belief system of society as represented by, for example, the use of language and visual images in the print media.

The OHRC and other commissions like it throughout the country are mandated and directed by human rights legislation, but even within that framework, they should be able to re-organize policy so that more subtle aspects of racism are recognized and given weight in investigating cases. The denial of racism used by so many whites in positions of authority ranging from the supervisor in a work place to the chief of Police and ministers of government must be understood for what it is: an example of White hegemonic power over those considered 'other'. Commissioners, investigative staff, legal staff and, in fact, all employees of human rights commissions should have a deeper appreciation of this social phenomenon. The new OHRC policy needs to recognize the role that difference and othering and their representation in terms of whiteness and blackness play in the social and cultural institutions of modern societies.

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