ANALYZING RACISMS IN THE WORKPLACE

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ABSTRACT

Racism is often thought of as a form of individual prejudice. This article proposes instead that racism be understood as a form of exclusion that has significant consequences for victims of discrimination. The article explains what constitutes racism and examines an issue of harassment in the workplace, in order to compare the two understandings of racism mentioned above.

Racism is often seen to be the result of difference; for example, it may be a response to human diversity. According to this view, racists are flawed or mean-spirited individuals who react irrationally to people who are different. In this case, racism is the combination of prejudice and power.[1] In Canada, racism becomes an exception, a kind of break in the great Canadian sea of polite discourse. If we follow this view, the accompanying solutions to racism also focus on individuals, and include remedies such as re-educating racists "to tolerate" difference. Larger patterns of institutional racism quickly become explained as the product of a few bad apples.[2] Furthermore, racism is seen as endemic to diverse societies because of our natural tendency to be prejudiced towards those who are different. It is countered, according to this view, by changing people's beliefs. The notion that racism is an individual problem is deeply flawed and results in flawed solutions and policies. It fundamentally misunderstands both the nature and effects of racism. It ignores the social dimension of individual prejudices and focuses unnecessarily on difference. Moreover, this view denies the history of racism, which shows that racist attitudes are repeatedly directed at groups that have historically been excluded and denied their rights; and that while human beings have found all sorts of nasty ways of treating each other, racism is a recent human invention. In Canada, this view disregards the recurring testimony of Inuit, Métis and First Nations people, African, Asian, Jewish and Muslim Canadians that racism is constant, and is either in play or in imminent danger of coming into play.[3] Far from being the exception, racism is all too often the norm. That racism is embedded in social and political structures and is not an individual flaw has been argued by leading scholars for well over a century.[4]

Consistent with this scholarship, I argue that racisms are exclusions.[5] They are exclusions of particular kinds that can be understood as meeting the following conditions:

- Racisms involve racializations
- Racisms organize racializations into exclusions
- Racisms have significant negative consequences for the excluded
- Racisms exist in the plural

Racialization is the social process of making "race," or categorizing people by race. Today in Canada, people tend to see "race" differences as natural and obvious. In fact, the way these differences are perceived changes with time and place. For example, in Britain until at least the 1980s, the term "Black" applied to all people of colour—including people of Chinese origins as well as people of African origins. This makes very little sense in North American contexts. Today in Canada, many African immigrants think of themselves as Somalis or Kenyans or Nigerians. They become "Black" or "African" only once they are in Canada. Meanwhile, common sense notions of "race" as skin colour groups are imagined rather than natural.[6] Racializations are always enacted with respect to one alleged group in relation to another. For example, to say that Snaidanacs do not like hockey is to say that there is some other group—non-Snaidanacs—that does. Racializations are always absolute. Someone is slotted into one group or another. We generally do not see that people can be varying degrees of Snaidanac or non-Snaidanac.[7]

Racializations alone are not necessarily racist, but they start to become such when they are organized into exclusions. Exclusions can take different forms. They can range from excluding the viewpoints of members of racialized groups to excluding the people themselves from

access to particular cultural, institutional or physical spaces. Creating exclusions always simultaneously creates inclusions. If someone is being excluded, someone else is being included. Exclusions are matter of fact. Someone is either excluded or not. This is to say, the intentions of the "excluder" do not influence whether or not something is racist. What matters is the effect, the exclusion and it consequences.

When racialized exclusions enact negative consequences on the racialized and excluded, they become racisms. How do you determine negative consequences? You need to talk to those who have been targeted by racism and take seriously what they say. You may not agree with what they say, but you need to listen and understand why they say it. Indeed, if you do not, you enact a racialized exclusion.

For example, consider the statement, "John is the Snaidanac in the corner." This is always a racialization, but it is not necessarily racist. Snaidanacs exist in relation to another group of non-Snaidanacs, and the difference between the two is always represented as total. If John is in the corner with a group of people and he is the only Snaidanac, this statement while racializing, is not necessarily racist. Indeed, to pretend that you do not see his Snaidanacness would probably be racist in itself, because you might be excluding how John self-defines himself. However, if John is the only person in the corner, to say, "John is the Snaidanac in the corner" (as opposed to saying, "John is in the corner") is to reduce him to his Snaidanacness and that would also be a form of exclusion (excluding the complexity of meanings that make up John) and hence would be racist.

Racisms exist in the plural because there are different racisms, each with their own effects and consequences. For example, anti-First Nations racisms in Canada are very different from antisemitism. Amongst other things, this means that someone can be racist with respect to one racism at the same time that they are anti-racist with respect to another.

Understanding racisms as forms of exclusion allows us to identify workable strategies for challenging and responding to racisms. Anti-racisms can address any one of the four conditions I identified above, either singly or in combination. They can challenge racializations, or in other words, the representation of difference as absolute and exclusive. They can organize inclusions. They can mitigate consequences. The multiplicity of racisms means that a strategy that addresses one racism may leave another unaffected. All anti-racist strategies begin with the resistance of the excluded, with taking the meanings of the racialized and excluded seriously, and with learning from and engaging with their perspectives.

Let's take a common example of racism in the workplace and explore the consequences of the two approaches to racism discussed above. A Snaidanac employee approaches you because she has overheard her supervisor saying disparaging things about Snaidanacs. Let's assume that you are the supervisor's manager. What do you do?

When we ascribe to the view that racism is a form of individual prejudice, we often focus our efforts on the offender. Your reaction might depend on the nature of the reported remarks. For example, you might take an ethnic joke less seriously than hateful comments. If you have a good relationship with the supervisor, you might say something like, "I will speak to him." You might even dismiss the complaint if you think the comments were not that serious. In private, you might suggest that the supervisor be careful about what he says in front of others because it is affecting office morale. If this is the latest in a series of complaints about the supervisor, you might send him for some kind of training on leadership or cultural sensitivity. Alternatively, you might feel that a disciplinary approach is needed. In unionized environments, this quickly becomes a question of collective agreements and grievances, official investigations, and "He said... She said..." This is an all-too-familiar nightmare for many busy managers, which is why it is often easier to ignore or downplay the initial complaint.

If racisms are exclusions that have negative consequences, our approach needs to begin with really listening and taking seriously what the Snaidanac employee is saying. What is she saying about the consequences of what she overheard? This is almost certainly not the first time that she has heard such negative language. In Canada, most people of colour first experience racist name calling in elementary school. What may seem a small matter—name-calling—can quickly become a big one if the name-calling is not properly addressed.[8] Having said this, racist names are always hurtful, even when directed at adults. So the first thing to focus on is this hurt, and its attendant feelings of isolation. Is this employee in effect saying that she is feeling so isolated and singled out that she can no longer function effectively? Think for a moment about what must be involved and how someone must feel to even think of making such a complaint to their boss' boss. Can they trust their supervisor in any of their interactions? In all the efforts focusing on the offender in the racism as prejudice response, nothing was done to address this feeling of isolation and exclusion. Even if the individual offender is ultimately removed, this underlying problem of isolation has not been addressed.

Understanding racisms as organized exclusions reframes what is actually going on in the comment of the supervisor. His comments, however intended, are

organizing two groups: an excluded group of "them Snaidanacs" and an included group of "us non-Snaidanacs." The supervisor may not consciously intend his comments to do this; he might be making the comments to appear funny (in the case of ethnic humour) and/or to be accepted by a group, but whether intended or not, he is creating a situation of exclusion. Is the Snaidanac who approached you the only one who is experiencing this kind of exclusion? How do the other Snaidanacs feel? How do the non-Snaidanacs feel? Do any of them feel the same thing? Are other people also feeling excluded? Do other employees also commonly make racist remarks, if not in front of the people from that background (because, as we know, that would be rude), then as soon as they leave the room? In many workplaces, this kind of complaint is merely the tip of the iceberg that reflects an underlying pattern of exclusions. How then do these exclusions get created? Do the Snaidanacs all sit at the same table in the lunchroom? Do they never get to be project leaders? Are all the executives non-Snaidanacs? Do only non-Snaidanac holidays get signified with welcoming displays in the reception area? Are the Snaidanacs paid less than the non-Snaidanacs? Are they not being hired? Can you answer and address these questions without singling out the Snaidanac employee so that she is not seen to be the problem, as having a chip on her shoulder or as being "over-sensitive." In other words, how can you and your colleagues foster de-racialized inclusions? Can you make those in your organization aware of the negative consequences of exclusion both for the excluded and for themselves, without singling out the excluded for even greater exclusion?

Finally, can you challenge the Snaidanac-non-Snaidanac binary? Are there common ways of talking in your workplace that foster this idea of absolute difference? What about the vocabularies that you and other leaders use? This involves arming your people to challenge racist stereotypes when they hear them: do all Snaidanacs really hate hockey? Or do the ones that you know? Or do you know any Snaidanacs? Even more importantly, you need to challenge hidden racializations; for example, statements that represent Canadians and immigrants as mutually exclusive.

Rethinking racisms as exclusions rather than individual prejudices is difficult. This is not a magic formula. It requires us to use all of our knowledge and skills and understandings of people and how they work. Nor is it something that can be done once and then be forgotten. Rather, it is an on-going engagement of listening and learning, seeking out excluded knowledge, and helping people to see that the differences that people bring to our workplaces and the rest of our lives are not deficits that need to be overcome, but advantages that will allow us all to contribute to the best of our ability.

NOTES

[1] See, for example, the definition of racism in the glossary provided by the Canadian Race Relations Foundation, http://www.crr.ca/.

[2] As argue Frances Henry and Carol Tator, *Racial Profiling in Canada: Challenging The Myth of 'A Few Bad Apples'* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press. 2006).

[3] See , for example, Frances Henry and Carol Tator, with a chapter by Tim Rees, *The Colour of Democracy: Fourth Edition* (Toronto: Nelson Education, 2010); Camile A. Nelson and Charmaine Nelson, *Racism, Eh?: A Critical Inter-disciplinary Anthology of Race and Racism in Canada* (Concord, Ont: Captus Press, 2004); Randy Enomoto and Genevieve Johnson, *Race, Racialization, and Antiracism in Canada and Beyond* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007); Paul R. Carr and Darren E. Lund (eds.), *The Great White North?: Exploring Whiteness, Privilege, and Identity in Education* (Rotterdam, The Netherlands: Sense Publishers, 2007).

[4] For an introduction to this literature, see Philomena Essed and David Theo Goldberg (eds.), *Race Critical Theories: Text and Context* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2002).

[5] For a forceful reminder of this, see David Theo Goldberg, *The Threat of Race: Reflections on Racial Neoliberalism* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing, 2009). My analysis follows that of Robert Miles, *Racism* (London: Routledge, 1989) and David Theo Goldberg, *Racist Culture: Philosophy and the Politics of Meaning* (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1993). See also, Timothy J. Stanley, *Contesting White Supremacy: School Segregation, Anti-Racism, and the Making of Chinese Canadians* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2011).

[6] The interactive website of the American Anthropological Association, "Race: Are We So Different?" http://www.understandingrace.org, provides an excellent discusison of race as a socially imagined rather than natural classification. See also Awad, Ibrahim, "Becoming Black: Rap and Hip Hop, Race, Gender, Identity, and the Politics of ESL learning," in P. Matsuda, et al (eds.), *Second-language Writing in the Composition Classroom: A Critical Sourcebook,* 131-148 (New York: St. Martin's, 2006).

[7] I use the term "Snaidanac" as a fictive racialized group to reflect the way that in Canada racialized difference is most often constituted in relation to "Canadians." The latter are usually thought of as "white" and somehow other groups are never seen as quite "Canadian" or as naturally belonging.

[8] Manju Varma-Joshi, Cynthia J. Baker and Connie Tanaka, "Names Will Never Hurt Me," *Harvard Educational Review,* Summer 2004: 175-208.

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