

'Race' and Racism: An Attempt to Organize Difference

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This article addresses the issue of 'race' and racism in the context of group-analytic psychotherapy. My contention is that at present there is no specific group-analytic understanding of racism. The article is aimed at group conductors, focusing on what terms might be used to view these issues as they manifest in groups. It challenges the notion of 'race' as an objective category and examines ways of viewing the phenomena of 'race' and racism as dynamic processes rather than as fixed and concrete events.

In discussion events at the Institute of Group Analysis, London, it seemed to me that on the whole it was a nineteenth-century view of the non-European that was put forward. Which is not to say that the group analysts were overtly racist, but that stereotypical views of the Other were accepted and not questioned — the attempts to understand 'difference' being mainly in terms of instinct, blood, 'race' and phylogeny. The dialogue that I have observed and participated in on this theme at the IGA and elsewhere has, at times, not been a dialogue — more a ritualized exchange between two sides, each using a limited vocabulary, one side chanting 'oppression, domination, and power relations', the other 'splitting, projection and transference'.

The task of building a group-analytic understanding of 'race' and racism to my mind consists in part at least of building a bridge between the two sides. The task is urgent. As the fiction that non-Europeans mainly somatize and so are unable to use psychotherapy begins to fade, more people from other cultures begin to participate in group

therapy. The issue of racism emerges in therapy more frequently, and so gives rise to questions as to how this material is to be understood and addressed. Much needs to be worked out to enable the group conductor to walk the thin line between colluding with a victim position and perpetuating and repeating an oppression within the group. For example, in a supervision group recently a (white) group conductor reported an interaction in which the only Asian member of the group was 'complaining about society being racist and how hard it was to get on and succeed'. The conductor's and group's response as reported was: 'What are you complaining about? It's not so bad here in London. If you lived in South Africa then there would really be something to complain about.'

The conductor was no doubt trying to help the patient with the assumption that what was being talked about was a displacement of a deeper issue, and of course that must be partly true. In effect the group were saying to the Asian, while your conscious experience is of being a victim, it is your unconscious that is the victimizer. The circle is complete, both victim and victimizer are contained within the same person, letting everybody else off the hook. In this instance the conductor and group repeat and reinforce an external oppression, while failing to engage the inner world of the patient.

This article assumes that we live in a historical era that began in the sixteenth century, during which imperial Europe colonized the rest of the world. The colonizer used various myths, phantasies and ideologies to maintain a division between the colonizer and the colonized. Colour was used as the primary visible signifier to distinguish 'us' from 'them'. In order to do this successfully, it was necessary for the hallucinatory whitening of all the peoples of Europe including the Roman, the Greek, the Celt, and of course Jesus Christ, so that they could be distinguished from 'the coloured'. It was this that generated the political category, 'black'. The categories 'black' and 'white' are hallucinations in the sense that there are no people that actually correspond to the chromatic notions of black and white. But there can be no argument that they exist as very powerful and meaningful political categories. This is the context within which all current theories and interactions take place.

The enormous complexities cannot be explored here. Let us just note three things:

1. Blacks too map values onto the colour differential to some degree. This is not because of any inherent connection between white and

good, rather it is a consequence of living in the larger economic edifice which is itself a consequence of the imperial era. I do not address how these dynamics are interiorized — that being a topic in itself.

2. The use of the terms 'black' and 'white' does not imply that there is no complexity within the groups black and white. The two groups are not homogeneous. Anticipating some of the content of the article, let us just say that the variety of differences within each group disappears when the two groups are faced with each other.

3. Oppressions and divisions occur on many axes, gender, class and religion, to name a few. This article limits itself to the dislocation that takes place on the axis of 'race', but that should not be taken as a comment that it is the only important division, or that the dynamics and themes explored here do not occur elsewhere.

The Validity of 'Race' as an Idea

The 'common sense' view of 'race' is that it is a biological category that contains immutable attributes which include the physical and the behavioural, cognitive processes and emotional vocabulary. Also pertinent is the assumption that the attributes are determined genetically. This idea of 'race' rests in the realm of biological determinism, of 'nature'.

The first anomaly in this view occurs when the list of races is drawn up: the number varies from one ('we are all one race') to hundreds. The confusion is indicative of the problematic nature of this concept. As Washburn (1963, quoted in Thomas and Sillen, 1979: 26) says: 'Since races are open systems which are intergrading, *the number of races will depend on the purpose of the classification*' (emphasis added).

At one time 'race' was equated with species (Agassiz, 1850) and later with 'breed'. More recently the concept of 'race' is beginning to lose all credibility, yet it remains very powerful as a folk concept and is freely used in psychodynamic discourse. Even among academics, the concept of 'race' is not dead. Smith (1986: 189–91) argues with vigour for race:

Race is an essentially biological concept based on those distinctive sets of hereditary phenotypical features that distinguish varieties of mankind. . . . Those gross hereditary physical differences that all men remark between Negroes, Asiatic Mongols, Whites . . . [are] objective and genetic in their base. . . . When couples of the same race, whatever that be, produce children who are randomly black, white, pygmoid etc. I shall gladly acknowledge my error in disputing current biological

ideology on the 'non existence of human races'. . . . Jersey cattle do not bring forth Angus or Friesian calves . . . must we none the less deny the objective differences between these differing breeds, varieties or races of animals because each contain some genetic variation.

The points to be tackled are (1) that the list of races is said to be 'objective', and objective because 'all men remark on these differences'; and (2) that when creatures of the same 'stock' are mated they give forth creatures also of the same stock.

To start with we should ask what does 'same stock' mean? Take the species 'dog'. It appears that there are a number of different 'pure' breeds and an infinite variety of 'mixed breeds' — that is, mixtures of the alleged 'pure' breeds. Now when asked what it is that makes a dog 'pure' or not, the breeders give two sorts of answers. The first is historical — certificates are pulled out which prove that the parents were pure, therefore this dog is also pure. The argument is a tautology. The second answer is given in terms of physical attributes: the ears are like so, the tail like this, the ratio of spine to legs within this range and so on. Now, take Rover, a dog who apparently fulfils all the criteria for an alsatian save one; its ears are longer and drop down instead of standing upright. What might be said then is that Rover is a mixed breed, that it is mainly alsatian, with some labrador.

However, this description can only be constructed once we assume the existence of the fixed points 'alsatian' and 'labrador', each with a set of given attributes. What is there to stop us calling dogs that look like Rover a pure breed of 'Rovers'? Nothing, in principle. We could think of all types of dogs on a continuum, with some of the points given priority and reified as breeds. Our new breed of 'Rovers' would be seen as a 'mixed breed' by dog breeders until their meaning world expanded to accommodate the new reification 'Rover'. Proof that the category existed would be when other people paid money to buy dogs like 'Rover', and institutions like Crufts accepted and valued the new category. As to the argument that says that alsatians mated with alsatians give forth dogs that look like alsatians and not labradors is proof that the alsatian is a biological fact, the naive but pointed repost to that is: so what? A 'Rover' mated with another would also give forth dogs that look like 'Rovers'. A 'Rover' is no less and no more pure than the next point on the continuum 'alsatian'. What is different is the meaning and value invested in the point 'alsatian'.

The argument put forward against the notion of 'race' is not one that seeks to deny 'difference'. Difference exists; and there are innumerable

differences. The point is that some differences are given significance over other differences. This generates a new question: why give significance to those particular differences? The position taken in this article broadly follows the view of Phizacklea and Miles (1980) who distinguish between 'race' and racism, and focus on the process of 'racialization'. Solomos (1986: 99) paraphrases their two programmatic conclusions: '(a) That "race" cannot be the object of analysis in itself, since it is a social construction which requires explanation. (b) That the object of analysis should be the process of "racialization" or "racial categorization" which takes place within the context of specific economic, political and ideological relations.'

Phenotypical variations are continuous and not discrete. 'Race' is a construction in which the variations within the group said to be a 'race' are perceptually diminished, while the variations between groups are perceptually emphasized, thus creating the 'discrete packages called race' (Thomas and Sillen, 1979: 28).

The Stereotype as an Attempt to Simplify the World

In the 1950s T.W. Adorno and G.W. Allport clearly linked stereotyping with prejudice and scapegoating. In the 1970s some social psychologists (for example, Taylor and Guimond, 1978, discussed in Tajfel, 1981) argued that stereotyping was not necessarily accompanied by prejudice. They argued that stereotypes are solely the result of cognitive functioning. A consequence of this view is that it gives oblique support for the notion of 'race' as a meaningful category. I suggest that while the stereotype does serve a purpose in the process of cognition, it is not a value-free activity, and that the concept of 'race' itself is merely the elevation of the stereotype into a [pseudo] scientific category. The stereotype is an experience (imagined or otherwise) of the Other.

The cognitive argument that stereotypes are neutral and useful categories, merely a way of organizing the world might be built as follows. (1) It is necessary to simplify the abundance of information received from the environment in order to make sense of it. In effect, the move from chaos to order. (2) This process is one of categorization through division, constructed around the 'law of the excluded middle' (that is, a given object has to belong to one of the sets 'A' or 'Not A', 'Me' or 'Not me' and so on). It is the process of naming. Naming is the process of fragmenting the universe. (3) In categorizing, one is inevitably simplifying, emphasizing some commonalities at the

expense of other differences. (4) Some such categories are stereotypes. (5) Stereotypes are generalizations reached by individuals, empirically. (6) Stereotypes in themselves are neutral and are merely ways of dividing up the world usefully. (7) Stereotypes are instances of the general cognitive process of categorizing. To my mind, the first three steps of the argument are sound, it is the rest that is problematic and to be questioned.

The process of differentiation is fundamental and basic to thought and experience. However, the process of differentiation — of dissecting experience into digestible parts — is not a neutral activity. It is determined in part by what is 'out there', and also in part by language, society and so on, the variety of 'lenses' through which the perception takes place.

A stereotype serves two functions, first, as already discussed, as a means of categorization, second, as a means of instruction. These instructions are of two sorts: (1) The stereotype is a template that has coded into it what one may become; for example women should grow up to be housewives, blacks can become nurses but not psychiatrists. (In this sense one could think of the stereotype as the cultural counterpart to the biological gene, both fixing and determining growth according to certain rules.) (2) A stereotype instructs the mind as to what is to be seen, for example blanking out an intelligent woman in favour of a man in a discussion. The power of stereotypes resides in the fact that they are social, in other words that they are shared descriptions and beliefs held by groups about other groups. The group conductor is not immune from these forces.

When one enquires what attributes populate racial groups, the answers are invariably stereotypes and are either negative ('lazy', 'sullen', 'dirty') or positive ('happy', 'at one with nature', 'natural dancers'). Race is stereotype disguised. The concept of 'race' only makes sense in the context of racism, with 'colour' being used as a powerful signifier to define and fix the Other.

The group analyst needs to be constantly vigilant to ensure that he or she does not fall into the trap of using 'race' or culture to understand events in the group. A group conductor said about a patient: 'Of course he is very outgoing and open — he is Italian.' In ascribing behaviour to nationality, it appears that the behaviour has been explained, while in fact the conductor has avoided engaging with the specific history of that patient. Are there Italians who are not outgoing and open? Does that make them immediately neurotic? Was this person covering up a depression with vivacity? Perhaps, perhaps not

— the point is that the use of nationality, mediated by stereotyping, prevented any further investigation.

Some Alternative Ways of Viewing 'Racial' Phenomena

Identity: Inside and Outside

Anthropology, through Barth (1969), introduced the notion of 'ethnicity' as a counter to the notion of 'tribe'. Since then it has come in many circles to replace and counter the notion of 'race'. Ethnicity, unlike race, is not fixed — it is situationally defined. It concerns the maintenance of social boundaries. The other difference between 'race' and 'ethnicity' concerns the notion of 'identity'.

Identity is constructed along the axes of 'similarity and difference'. The attributes that constitute 'us' are either imposed from the outside or chosen from the inside and can have negative or positive characteristics. The constituent parts can be tabulated as shown in Figure 1.

FIGURE 1

	ME	NOT ME	'RACE' the axis of difference
YOU	you are what I am	you are what I am not	
NOT YOU	I am what you are not	I am not, what you are not	ETHNICITY: the axis of similarity

'Ethnicity' is a group identification; it defines an 'us' (the similarity axis being primary); its contents include culture and geography. 'Race' is a categorization; it defines a 'them' (the difference axis being primary). The us/them boundary is imposed from outside when 'race' is talked about, and taken on from the inside when 'ethnicity' is the organizing theme. As Jenkins (1986: 175) put it:

. . . ethnicity is transactional, shifting, and essentially impermanent. . . . Ethnicity signifies allegiance to the culture of origin and it implies a degree of choice which 'race' precludes. (emphasis added)

It should be remembered that one does not need to *feel* part of a group

to be defined as belonging to it. An example occurred in the first meeting of an experiential group in a counselling training organization. Some of the participants had attended the institution during the previous year. They felt like a group to themselves as they had a shared history. From their viewpoint, a 'group' of newcomers had joined them in the second year; the newcomers were lumped together because of their shared attribute: 'new'. However, each of the newcomers experienced him- or herself as an isolated individual, with nothing in common with the other newcomers. The vignette neatly draws out the distinction between 'culture' which is an inner experience of shared events, and 'race' which is imposed from the outside. The newcomers had no shared history or culture among themselves, and so no sense of belonging to a group. But that did not prevent the 'old timers' from perceiving and treating them as a coherent group ('race'). The parallels with the immigration experience are obvious.

Boundaries

Social anthropology, as a theory of boundaries, offers group analysis useful ways of thinking about groups in general and racism in particular. The discipline focuses on boundary definition, boundary permeability, and the transactions that take place across boundaries (Wallman, 1986). A variety of differences are used to define boundaries, food, religion, geography, history, clothes, class, culture and phenotype, to name a few. Thus phenotype is one sort of difference which is used, at times, to define boundaries: 'Differences between groups of people turn into ethnic boundaries only when heated into significance by the identity investments of either side' (Wallman, 1986: 230). What and where the boundary is, which attribute is significant at any one moment, will depend enormously on the current context: 'Social boundaries are fluid because the same difference can have different meaning in another context' (Wallman, 1986: 234).

Imagine a large dinner party in South Africa attended by whites. There is one vegetarian in a room full of meat-eaters. To the vegetarian perhaps that identity is painfully primary during the meal. To another guest perhaps men/women is the significant division. A few minutes later a hostile white waiter comes in. A new marker is introduced, which has the potential to create a new division and alliances, and in which the old differences between the guests can become insignificant as they face the intruder. The new division can be seen along class lines. A black walking in a few minutes after that would result once again in a reshuffling of allegiances; this time along colour lines.

The task of an observer is to work out why, given the multiplicity of potential boundaries, a particular boundary suddenly becomes significant. Thus in a group, a black person might feel that colour is the primary difference that drives and organizes his or her experience in the group. At the same time the conductor might think differently; for example the white conductor mentioned at the beginning thought that it was early and forgotten events in the Asian patient's life that organized the patient's experience of the group. To say that one perception is truer than the other leads us into a cul-de-sac. It is more useful to think in terms of each being partially true. What does a patient gain and avoid by focusing on the axis of colour? What is he or she trying to communicate in pointing to this difference? And we have to ask of the conductor what does he or she resist (given that the patient's perception is a partial truth) if he or she interprets the issue of colour solely in terms of an internal dynamic. What does the conductor gain? Why does the conductor find it hard to hear this particular communication? There can be no general answer to the question what will it mean when 'race' is introduced by a participant into a group: the answers must be contextually specific.

In a weekly large group experience in which I participated, some of the white members drew attention over several weeks to the fact that there were few black people in the room, and expressed concern as to whether they were being excluded and marginalized, whether they were feeling left out. I felt increasingly angry without understanding why. Why was this difference, signified by colour, important to these particular whites in this context? Much later, I understood it in the following way: on the manifest level it appeared that the whites were being sympathetic to the plight of the blacks and were trying to include them. But in fact these particular whites, by continually pointing to this difference, actively separated the blacks from the whole, and then invited them to carry the insecurities for the whole group. The manifest act of inclusion covered over and disguised the acts of exclusion and scapegoating.

Belonging: 'In' and 'Out' Groups

In its attempt to understand the phenomenon of racism, the Chicago School of Social Psychology introduced two useful concepts: 'social distance' and 'social accommodation'. Banton (1986: 44) describes social distance as follows:

. . . [we can] think of a community as a series of concentric circles. A newcomer who respects the wishes of those who already belong, and who is willing to modify his (or her) own behaviour, can gain entry into the outer circle and move inwards.

The dynamic is activated whenever a new member joins a group, and is familiar to group analysts. However, it is rather a benign view, in that it supposes that as long as one fulfils certain criteria one will be admitted into the sanctum. But if one of the criteria is the colour of one's skin or one's gender, then one is forever excluded, and it is in effect not possible to 'respect the wishes of those who already belong' no matter how much one may wish to do so.

'Social accommodation' addresses the tension between groups, and is defined as

. . . an organization of elements more or less antagonistic to each other, but united for the moment . . . racial prejudice is aroused when there is a real or imaginary threat to the pattern of 'social accommodation'. (Lal, 1986: 288)

For example, things are fine as long as the blacks stay in Hackney, and the whites in Hampstead. All parties agree implicitly to the others' location in the racial hierarchy; the status quo is maintained as long as one 'knows one's place'. It is when there is attempted movement, that dormant hostilities are fanned alive.

The first impulse is to join; it is when that is thwarted, that the 'out' group is created. It is at this point that the excluded subordinate group reinforces its difference to the dominant group as a strategic device, in order to join it, to partake of the resources (Lal calls it the ethnicity paradox). What should be remembered is that the subordinate group's emphasis on the primary difference is a reaction and not an initiation. This idea sheds useful light on a particular dynamic that takes place when a black participant in a group talks about 'race' or colour. In talking about colour, the black member is in effect attempting to 'reinforce a difference'. Two types of reactions have been commonly evoked from the white participants: the first is hostility, and is couched in terms of the black 'having a chip on the shoulder' or 'being too sensitive'; the second reaction is couched in liberal language and is expressed as 'I don't see the colour, just the person'. However the aim (perhaps unconscious) of both interventions is to deny the real existence of the dislocation; the implication which follows is that the divide and its consequences are a paranoid phantasy that exists only in the mind of the black. We should ask what does the white denial seek to achieve? The unconscious aim of both reactions is to render the difference meaningless, in order to inhibit the process of 'Lal's paradox'. This has the effect of sustaining the marginalization while

supplying the illusion of equality. After all, one has to acknowledge the existence of a divide before one can bridge it.

The tendency for the 'out group' to 'separate' manifests in two forms, one active and one passive. The active form manifests when the out group organizes and fights for change: black power, radical feminism and so on. An example of the passive form occurs when government earmarks money for ethnic minority organizations. In order to partake of the 'charity' one has to show that one belongs to a club that is recognized by the establishment, and further, the club has to define itself in terms of lack in order to be eligible to receive the 'gift'. Interestingly, a consequence of the passive form is that it tends to fragment the various ethnic groups as each group has to emphasize its difference from other groups. It has to show that it is more oppressed and damaged than the others in order to get a larger slice of the scarce resources. While the active form directs its energy upwards towards the oppressors, the passive form directs its energies horizontally towards the oppressed. This kind of dynamic is not unfamiliar in analytic groups, where at times members define themselves in terms of lack, attack each other and vie with each other for the conductor's attention.

Discussion

I have argued for a fluctuating view of reality that is contextually determined, and against the notion of a fixed 'race' or ethnicity either in nature or nurture. Similarly, I have tried to show that the racial dynamic can have many intentions.

When a particular depth of focus is chosen, whatever it may be (men/women, black/white, late/on time), certain similarities are emphasized, while others are ignored. It is useful to ask 'Why choose that particular depth of focus? What's the payoff and to whom?' And of course there will be two answers, one conscious, which will be framed in terms of the task, and the other unconscious — perhaps an avoidance of other similarities and differences. Additionally, when someone resists a particular depth of focus we have to ask: 'What don't they want to see and why?' Given the variety of differences that exists, 'black and white' being only one among many, it is interesting to note how often this particular difference is made to disappear in group-analytic and psychotherapeutic contexts, being transformed through interpretation and reduced to the mother–infant paradigm. No doubt the black/white issue does have other powerful levels of meaning and

affect attached to it, loss and anxiety to name but two, but the interpretation is to be questioned when it is used to annihilate the real experience of marginalization and being kept Other.

A black patient in a predominantly white group, expresses her felt experience, which is that of being excluded because of her colour. If the group and analyst take it up exclusively in terms of the past history of the patient, in other words transference, then the focus is moved from the 'here-and-now' to the 'there-and-then'. What might be said to the patient (the interpretation) is: 'What you feel to be going on here is not really happening, it is something from your past that you have transferred into the present. It is a phantasy not a fact. You are not angry with us, it is with some other.'

A possible reason why the group and analyst find it hard to linger in this particular present, is that to do so would be to face the possibility that the feeling of exclusion is not only a phantasy (in terms of transference) but also a fact — a living event in the group. To remain in the present is to face the pain of being implicated in the differentials of power and privilege. In this sense the transference interpretation is itself a defence — a flight from guilt.

Generalizing

These ideas give us a useful way of thinking about the process of 'seeing' what goes on in a group in general. When one makes any observation about the group, the statement consists of a comment on the relationship of one part of the group (real or imagined) to another part (for example, the quiet ones envying the voluble ones). Here, the 'whole' has been divided by emphasizing certain commonalities (amount of speaking time, for example), while other differences are ignored (men/women perhaps). The conductor or another member might divide the group anew, emphasizing other similarities and differences, perhaps invoking anxiety as the primary differential — in effect, formulating an interpretation. This constant flux of connections being made (similarity) and broken (difference) is the process of the group. To go further, one can speculate on the possible nature of an internal dynamic that might contribute to the need to differentiate, by invoking a premise which is a version of Sigmund Freud's constancy principle (Freud, 1920): *Within the psyche, the reduction of anxiety is a major organizing principle.*

The next step would be to suggest that the management of difference is used to service this aim. Following that we can make the

suggestion that in some instances anxiety will be reduced by belonging (similarity), and in other instances anxiety will be reduced by separation (difference). But having said that we have in a sense avoided the issue of what the anxiety is actually about. Any answer to that must incorporate the material world as well as the psychological. It is this formulation that should inform any interpretation that the analyst might make. Which is to say that the language of group analysis needs to be extended in order to engage with this kind of material without constantly falling into the reductionism of either the mother–infant paradigm or the oppressor–oppressed paradigm.

To recapitulate, there are innumerable differences in a group, any one of which might be active. The complexity of the group dynamic is temporarily understood by simplifying and making one difference primary. A particular understanding has been gained at the cost of rendering other differences and understandings temporarily invisible. There is nothing untoward in this as long as one does not become fixated around a particular understanding — imagining it to be the only understanding.

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Discussion on Paper by Farhad N. Dalal *Ian Simpson*

As more people from cultures other than white European begin to participate in group psychotherapy it is essential that we, as group analysts, acknowledge what this means for our practice. Farhad Dalal contends that at present, there is 'no specific group-analytic understanding of racism' and that we urgently need to begin to build one. I agree wholeheartedly with him on both points. However, it is not only in the field of group therapy that there is little understanding of racism and its effects. Lack of awareness is prevalent in the UK throughout all the institutions responsible for the training and practice of psychological therapies.

I raised this issue recently with a psychiatrist who is very involved in psychotherapy and I was met with a response which could only be described as confused amazement. Her reply was 'Do you really think that race affects how we work with a patient?' I am sure this response will come as no surprise to those black therapists and patients who regularly meet it in everyday interactions, and who are often made painfully aware of the denial of their difference and the implications of this in terms of identity and status. It is not to them that I address this commentary, although I hope that it is seen as a support for them