Racial Hierarchy and the Global Black Experience of Racism

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Abstract

This article aims to raise awareness on the life conditions of black people in Australia and beyond, and to renew public interest and discussion on how racial inferiority discourses, beliefs, and stereotypes about black people acquired and disseminated generations ago during colonialism together with institutional racism continue to limit their life opportunities and push them to the margins of the society. Therefore, this article explores racial hierarchy, white privilege and the socioeconomic challenges faced by black people. It does this by discussing how structures of inequality generated by the concept of race and its use in racialization continue to impact on the global black experience and condition. The article argues that racial inequality is perpetuated, especially, when racism codified in the institutions of everyday life is not acknowledged.

Keywords

Black Africans, Racial Hierarchy, White Privilege, Racism

1. Introduction

Growing up in Eastern Nigeria where everyone had the same skin color, spoke almost the same language, ate the same food and dressed in similar ways did not give me the chance to think or speak about racism. As a child, I was taught that all humans are equal, to work hard and be rewarded. I took it for granted that all men are equal and assumed that anyone who works hard can achieve what he or she wants in life. However, when I left Africa to Australia and learned the plight of people of African descent, I began to question the values instilled in me since my childhood. Wanting to learn more about the lived experiences of black Africans in Australia, I began my doctoral studies. I found that people of African descent are among the most disadvantaged groups in Australia. The discursive constructions of their black identity in everyday language and social relations

work to construct their lived reality of being, becoming and being positioned as a racialized subject "Other" leading to their objectification, oppression, marginalization and exclusion from society, which in turn, affect their employment, income, including access to good work, housing, health and career progression. Consequently, they continue to experience poor socioeconomic outcomes.

Indeed, most blacks living in Australia and beyond have been affected by their constant racial difference, and this in turn has had a major impact on their life chances. While addressing the problem of race and the relation of the darker to the lighter races, W. E. B. Du Bois (1897) [1], one of the greatest American social theorists of race, proposes that "the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line". Many civil right leaders have fought against this color line and advocated for racial justice. The fact remains that all the pressing issues of today seem to rotate around the color line and around racial hierarchy, an indication that race continues to endure in contemporary times. Despite the activism and dedication of many civil right leaders and their efforts to promote racial equality, the human society continues to operate as if differences in race, skin color, ethnic origin, language, culture, and religion are real. In view of the reality that the world has not yet cured racism nor overcome centuries of racial groupings, discrimination and subjugation, this article explores racial hierarchy, white privilege and the socioeconomic challenges faced by black people. It does this by discussing how structures of inequality generated by the concept of race and its use in racialization continue to impact on the global black experience and condition. The article aims to raise awareness on the life conditions of black people in Australia and beyond, and to renew public interest and discussion on how racial inferiority discourses, beliefs, and stereotypes about black people acquired and disseminated generations ago during colonialism together with institutional racism continue to limit their life opportunities and push them to the margins of the society. The article argues that racial inequality is perpetuated, especially, when racism codified in the institutions of everyday life is not acknowledged. It is worth pointing at the outset that an exhaustive presentation of the socioeconomic conditions of blacks globally is beyond the scope of this article. However, the article suggests that race remains an important dimension for discrimination and disadvantage of black people. Though global race relations have significantly improved, yet, anti-black racism is still a global phenomenon. It is the expectation, therefore, that this article can help to raise further debate and conversations on the life conditions of black people in the 21st century, especially in most white dominated nations, including Asia and South America.

2. The Concept of Race

Goldberg (1993: 62) [2] notes that race is one of the central conceptual inventions of modernity which was used to explicate European history and nation formation and to reflect the discovery and experience of groups very different from, and indeed, strange to the European eyes and self. Banton (2012: 1110) [3] describes race as "an alternative expression used for classifying humans differen-

tiated by phenotype". Similarly, Hall (2005: 123) [4] adds that race is a concept used to categorize and qualify different varieties of human bodies distinguished by physical traits, phenotype, blood type, or a distinctive group of people sharing a geographical space. Following this line of thought, race can be described as an analytic construct which is capable of capturing the different categories of human beings, their physical characteristics, their historical baggage and their transnational dimensions (Wade 2012) [5].

Race is, fundamentally, a basis and mechanism of distinction and differentiation used in scientific, political and social discourses capable of shaping and ordering social relations as well as the allocation of life experiences and life chances (Jacobson 1998; Bobo and Fox 2003) [6] [7]. Complex social relations can be explained by using the self-evident simplicities of the mental economy of employing race as a descriptive and explanatory concept. For the vast majority of social scientists, race is a social construct used to categorize, differentiate or separate peoples along lines of presumed differences. It is not a meaningful biological entity built on phenotypical variation—that is, disparities in physical appearance. Weber (1998) [8], for example, argues that along with other comparable concepts such as gender and class, race is historically specific, socially constructed hierarchies of domination and systems of oppression.

As a matter of fact, who belongs to which subgroup is largely a matter of social definition and tradition. It is not based on any biological differences (Goldberg 1993) [2]. Race is given meaning and significance in specific social, historical and political contexts. It relies on theoretical and social discourses for the meaning it assumes at any time in history. Although race is biologically and genetically irrelevant, it is a social fact, a self-evident characteristic of human identity and character (Downing and Husband 2005) [9] because it is widely employed as a universal descriptive category to designate groups to which both "Self" and "Other" belong (Hall 2004) [10]. One important element in the success of the term race is the taken-for-granted reasonableness of employing racial categories to identify people (Downing and Husband 2005) [9]. For example, in the United States and other comparable Western countries, racial identity is so politicized that no one is complete without one, and often, people lay claim to a racial identity that represents for them central aspects of their person. On the basis of their physical attributes, particularly skin color, people are seen, marked or described as different, as belonging to a group which results in either inclusion or exclusion. Hence, Weber (1998) [8] argues that the key to understanding race is to note that it is based on social relationships, that is in power relationships, between dominant and subordinate groups and that the centerpiece of race as a system is the exploitation of one group by another as there can be no valued race without races that are defined as the Other and races that have more power and privileges than others.

3. The Global Hierarchy of Race

Once "hierarchy" and not "equality" began to define humanity and became the

definitive feature of the universe from the sixteenth century, Europeans began to be represented as "Whites" and "civilized race" having the capacity for self-determination while natives of Africa were represented as "Blacks" and "savage race", lacking in self-control and autonomy (Goldberg 1993) [2]. This led to a paradigm on how to think about race, which Perea (1997) [11] calls "the black and white binary paradigm of race". Despite today's color-blind discourses and efforts made to deal with racial inequality and injustice, this black-white binary paradigm has solidified into fixed racial categories and has had a long-standing bearing on peoples' attitudes. The paradigm has continued to this date to furnish to a great measure a central strand of the means of tying people, power, and history together. The black and white binary paradigm of race has also given definition to human sociocultural order. Indeed, the paradigm has created a caste-like separation between blacks and whites and the conditions for the formulation of racial hierarchy, racist expressions, and practices.

The world's population has surpassed 7,500,000,000 people (Worldometers 2017) [12]. Based on Worldometers' (2017) [12] world population counter, whites (people who have origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East or North Africa) seem to outnumber blacks (people of African descent or people having origins in any of the black racial groups of Africa). In the global hierarchy of race, whites have continued to be at the top of the hierarchy while blacks have continued to be at the bottom of the pile (Orelus 2012) [13]. In every corner of the globe, whites enjoy an extraordinary personal power and privilege bestowed by their skin color (Jacques 2003) [14]. For example, in the United States and comparable countries such as Australia, whites historically have a superior status and privilege, while dark-skinned and other people of color have inferior status and are generally considered as the "Other". In Australia, while the whites continue to enjoy a higher level of well-being, the Indigenous or Aboriginal people, including the black Africans in Australia continue to experience high levels of racism and disadvantage (Paradies and Cunningham 2009) [15]. The global hierarchy of race remains and persists also in Asian countries such as India, Indonesia, the Philippines, China, Kyrgyzstan and South Korea (Kolhatkar 2015) [16] and in most Latin American nations such as Brazil, Colombia and Venezuela. Blacks are often at the bottom. For example, Cottrol (2001: 33) [17] found that in most Latin American countries, Whites, generally have a superior status. People of Indian racial background whose cultural practices are mainly of Portuguese or Spanish derivation would be next on the social ladder. Mestizos, people of mixed indigenous and white background, would have a higher rating than those of largely Indian background. At the bottom of the social pyramid would be Afro-Americans, with mulattoes occupying a higher social status than blacks.

The influence of European imperialism and colonial discourses made it appear to both scientists and laymen alike that blacks were inferior to whites. For several Europeans and church fathers in the West, the color "black" was associated with darkness, the devil and evil while the color "white" was signified as

good and pure (Jahoda 1999) [18]. Blacks were represented as less than fully human, considered as primitives, savages, cannibals, slavish, barbaric, stupid, and pathologized as lacking in culture, civilization, morality, kindness, and incapable of Christianity (Goldberg 1993; Smith 2002) [2] [19]. Their rational capacity, the very condition of their humanity, was denied and their fitness for enslavement was defined by their brutishness and barbarism (Goldberg 1993) [2]. It still appears that "race as blackness, even today, is still a powerful deterrent to complete self-actualization" (Fordham 1996: 52) [20]. As a result of being constructed as the black other, countless black Africans in America, Australia and other comparable developed countries regardless of their degree of assimilation and conformity have been unable to overcome the limitations associated with being constructed as blacks. However, by virtue of their race and simply for being constructed as whites, white people have unearned advantages over black people. Being white gives considerable privilege to white people (Frankenberg 1993; McIntosh 1998; Solórzano and Yosso 2002) [21] [22] [23].

4. White Privilege and Racism

According to Goldberg (1993), there is no racism without some allusion to the concept of race. As an ideology of racial domination, racism is the beliefs in the inherent superiority of one race over all others and thereby the right to dominance (Solórzano and Yosso 2002) [23]. Combining prejudice and power in the definition of racism, Essed (1991: 111) [23] defines racism as a dynamic process of oppression and control sustained by legitimizing ideologies and beliefs. Essed (1991) [24] contends that racism is recognized in both individual acts of discrimination and structural systems in society that protect unearned advantage and confer racial dominance. Writing about the racial dominance of whites, the power of white supremacy and the invisibility of white privilege, Tatum (2003: 9) [25] argues that "despite the current rhetoric about affirmative action and 'reverse discrimination', every social indicator, from salary to life expectancy, reveals the advantages of being White". She argues that the white person is "knowingly or unknowingly, the beneficiary of racism, a system of advantage based on race" (Tatum 2003) [25]. Gallagher (2007: 13) [26] therefore defines whiteness as "a form of property that yields both tangible assets (land, jobs) and privileges (citizenship, social honor) to whites that are or have been denied to nonwhites". Gallagher takes the position that the inherent power of whiteness is the confluence of multiple social and political fictions that have transformed this category into the dominant, universal racial norm other racialized groups are forced to mirror. Frankenberg (1993: 1) [21] enunciates three linked dimensions of whiteness: 1) whiteness as a location of structural advantage, of race privilege; 2) whiteness as a "standpoint", a place from which white people look at themselves, at others, and at society; and 3) whiteness as a set of cultural practices that are usually unmarked and unnamed. These configurations of whiteness make white privilege relevant in societies structured in racial dominance (Frankenberg 1993) [21].

Solórzano and Yosso (2002: 27) [23] define white privilege as "a system of opportunities and benefits conferred upon people simply because they are White". White privilege usually occurs through the valuation of white skin color to the extent that privilege is granted even without a subject's recognition that life is made a bit easier for him or her for being white (Leonardo 2004) [27]. The white skin color, as an asset, gives privilege and the positive privilege of belonging in everyday life-the feeling that one belongs within the social circle (McIntosh 1998) [22]. This privilege is like an invisible package of unearned assets or an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, assurances, tools, maps, guides, codebooks, passports, visas, clothes, compass, emergency gear, and blank checks (McIntosh 1998) [22]. For example, in the in the United States and comparable countries, a white skin opens many doors for whites whether or not they approve of the way dominance has been conferred on them. Also, in many Western societies, the appearance of being a good citizen rather than a troublemaker comes in large part from having all sorts of doors open automatically simply because one is white.

Indeed, being white typically affords a disproportionate share of status and greater relative access to the material resources that shape life chances. It confers both dominance and privilege to white people (Moreton-Robinson 1999) [28] and still plays a part in determining inclusion and acceptance of black people in societies structured in racial dominance (Holt 1999) [29]. Thus, Solórzano and Yosso (2002) [23] argue that racism is the ideology that creates, maintains, and justifies white privilege. According to Delgado and Stefancic (2012: 8) [30], the little incentive in large segments of society to eradicate racism is because racism advances the interests of both white elites (materially), and working-class Caucasians (psychically). Bonilla-Silva (2014) [31] explains this clearly in his work. First, Bonilla-Silva (2014) [31] argues race, though, socially constructed, has helped to maintain the totality of the social relations and practices that reinforce racial privileges that benefit members of the white race, and in so doing, maintain racial inequality. According to Bonilla-Silva (2014: 9) [31], when race emerged in human history, it formed a social structure (a racialized social system) that awarded systemic privileges to Europeans (the people who became "white") over non-Europeans (the peoples who became "non-white"). Hence, Bonilla-Silva (2014) [31] contends that racial structures remain in place in contemporary times for the same reasons that other structures do. As the people racialized as white or as the members of the dominant race receive material benefits from the racial order (or passively receive the manifold wages of whiteness), they struggle to maintain their privileges. In contrast, those defined as belonging to the subordinate race or races (blacks) struggle to change the status quo or become resigned to their position of low race status (Bonilla-Silva 2014) [31].

5. Black Identity and Disadvantage

Many studies show that black people in most white majority nations experience social and economic challenges. For example, comparing immigrants' labor

market outcomes in most developed countries, Lemaitre (2007) [32] found that black immigrants experience noticeably worse settlement and economic outcomes than do white immigrants. Also various research published in Australia show that African migrants and refugees in Australia are positioned in the "Other" category (Matereke, 2009) [33], constitute one of the most disadvantaged groups in Australian society (Udo-Ekpo 1999; Colic-Peisker and Tilbury 2007; Hebbani and Colic-Peisker 2012; Hebbani 2014) [34] [35] [36] [37], face multiple barriers (Hebbani and McNamara 2010) [38], and experience both street and labor market discriminations (Colic-Peisker 2009) [39] on the grounds of being "visibly" and "culturally different" in the context of predominantly white Australia. Studies in New Zealand have also shown that people of African descent are excluded from effective participation in the economic, social and cultural life of the community and often find it a challenge to break the cycle of disadvantage because of discrimination and prejudice (Chile 2002; Jelle, Guerin and Dyer 2006) [40] [41].

In addition to the examination of racism as a contributor to black peoples' social and economic disadvantage, research from Canada by Danso (2002) [42] found that black Africans in Toronto suffer significant downward socioeconomic mobility and experience the greatest difficulty in securing appropriate employment resulting from discrimination. Likewise, in their study, Esses *et al.* (2007) [43] found that a black applicant was evaluated significantly less favorably than a white applicant. Even when there were no actual differences between the qualifications of a White applicant and those of a black applicant, Esses *et al.* (2007: 116) [43] found that a black applicant was more likely to have his skills discounted. A Swedish study also found that being black is sufficient reason to lose a much needed holiday job for many African young men and women (Hällgren 2005) [44]. In the United States, every two days, a black person is unfairly stopped, searched, questioned, physically threatened, abused or shot by the police (Smith 2016) [45]. The years 2015 and 2016 have been, particularly, years of protests in the USA against racist system, campaigns fighting against racialized identity constructions and associated forms of discrimination and a Black Lives Matter demonstration against police violence and brutality.

6. Institutional Racism and the Black Experience

The social and economic challenges that black people in most white majority nations still face does not happen in a vacuum. Despite the status of many black Africans as legal citizens in most developed countries, they are, often, less satisfied with their lives, finances and their place in the society. Is it a coincidence that they are, often, at the bottom of the socioeconomic ladder? Why do many black people in most developed countries experience much more severe socioeconomic deprivation? While there may be many factors contributing to their societal disadvantage such as education, age and gender, and even country of residence, there is a strong association between institutional racism and disadvantage among a number of blacks in developed countries (Paradies 2006, Marlowe,

Harris and Lyons 2013) [46] [47].

The Macpherson Report (1991: 28) [48] defines institutional racism as:

The collective failure of an organization is to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture, or ethnic origin. It can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes and behaviour which amount to discrimination through unwitting prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping which disadvantage minority ethnic people.

Institutional racism is, often, structural not just in people's minds. It resides in the racist policies, procedures, operations and culture of institutions. It is normative and sometimes legalized. Often, it manifests itself both in material conditions, for example, differential access to sound housing and gainful employment; and in access to power, for example, differential access to information including one's history, resources including wealth and organizational infrastructure, and voice including voting rights, representation in government, and control of the media (Jones 2000) [49]. Institutional racism has not only led to their oppression and exclusion from society, job markets, lack of career progression, and poor access to housing, education, food, medical care, and public spaces, but also it has produced high incarceration rates in prison, police violence and brutality, poor health problems, and disparities in educational attainment and legal outcomes.

Institutional racism has also affected them economically and politically and has also played a major role in their misrepresentation in public discourses by the government, media and other mechanisms of mass communication (Orelus 2012, Marlowe, Harris and Lyons 2013) [13] [47]. For the most part, the media have grossly misrepresented, racialized and portrayed a superficial and negative image of black people that continues to anchor them to the bottom of the world racial hierarchy. Specifically, the media have portrayed black persons as biologically and mentally inferior, as violent thieves and drug dealers in mainstream movies. According to Orelus (2012: 3) [13], through these movies, the media have presented two different worlds: a people of color and a white world which has become in some way part of collective consciousness, whites and black people alike. Consequently, black people are the group most negatively affected by systemic and institutional racisms. That is exactly why black African activists in America and in the globe insist on the slogan "Black Lives Matter" rather than "All Lives Matter" (Kolhatkar 2015) [16].

7. Conclusion

The struggle not to be judged and discriminated on the basis of skin color is real and disheartening for many black people. Often, their black skin color shapes the way they move through the world, think and interact with the world, as well as the way they are related to in society. Therefore, the global black experience and the continuous place of black people at the bottom of the global racial hie-

rarchy call for the acknowledgement of the reality of institutional racism which is structural and the racialization of blacks in public discourses that are racist and stereotypical. As Tatum (2015: 19 - 20) [50] would say, it is one thing to have enough awareness of racism to describe the ways that people of color (blacks) are disadvantaged by it and another thing to understand that the system of advantage is perpetuated when the existence of racism in everyday life is not acknowledged. One important feature of racism which black people experience in contemporary society is that it involves practices, and not just "acts" but attitudes (prejudice), ideologies and complex relations of acts (the seemingly subtle covert acts and conditions of discrimination against them) namely, those social cognitions and social acts, processes, structures, or institutions that are recurrent and familiar in everyday life and become part of what is seen as "normal" by the dominant members of society but directly or indirectly contribute to their marginalization, exclusion and oppression as people and as a group (Van Dijk 1993) [51]. The more status or authority involved in the perpetuation of these practices, the greater the damage. As such, a critical reflection on the structural and ideological foundations of racism in social relations can help to appropriately address the global black experience of racism and inequality in contemporary times. As Orelus (2012: 6) [13] states, because of a white racial superiority discourse that has been circulated through textbooks and the mainstream media, many white people have learned to believe that black people are mentally and biologically inferior. To counter such a racist and white hegemonic ideology, following Orelus (2012) [13], I argue that there is need to deconstruct the negative images and stereotypes that have been constructed about black people. There is need also for the achievements of blacks to be taught in schools and promoted through textbooks and the mainstream media. In addition, there is need for black and white people everywhere in the world to work together in curing and fighting against racism and in deconstructing the racial superiority ideological discourses circulated through institutions, such as the media, textbooks, schools, churches, families, workplaces, and laws.

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