

# Article

## Race and race thinking: reflections in theory and practice for researchers in South Africa and beyond

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### **Abstract**

This article is primarily concerned with the theoretical debates and practical dilemmas of doing research on race and race thinking in South Africa, and beyond.

In a society where many micro and macro interactions are mediated through a racial lens, the article questions the role of the state and of research more broadly, in creating a political project that opens new possibilities for livelihoods that move across and outside of race. More specifically it asks researchers to examine critically their own practices in the way we ask questions, how we select respondents and think about researchers' identities. Researchers should take seriously the responsibility of social science in constructing future possibilities for thinking about race, and consider the value of beginning the process of moving away from essentialised racial categories – in research and policy. Drawing on ethnographic data from a case study in Albert Park, Durban, the article examines how these rich theoretical reflections are played out and reshaped in the process of data collection and analysis. More specifically it attempts to offer some tools for shifting into more reflexive and alternative methodologies for researching race, a shift that is paramount if researchers are to contribute towards building inclusive and open spaces and dialogues.

### **Introduction**

In South Africa, researching race<sup>1</sup> and race thinking<sup>2</sup> takes on a particular specificity. It is entangled in the project of nation building, deeply entrenched in politics, written into policies, continues to mediate everyday interactions, and questions how we define our humanity in this geographic location. For those interested in historic analysis, the distant and recent past provides

rich evidence for how and why racial ontologies and racist policies shape state structures and life experiences. The present also holds interest. South Africa's unique moment of regime change builds on non-racialism as a 'founding provision' on constitutional paper, but grapples with the practicalities of moving out of the horrors of apartheid towards a democratic state.<sup>3</sup> In the Editorial note to this special issue Zimitri Erasmus calls for a standpoint that 'troubles the taken for granted idea that apartheid race categories remain administratively and analytically necessary' (p3), and urges us to pay attention to the 'possible consequences of the continued bureaucratisation of apartheid race categories'. In this paper I extend this criticality and thinking about 'possible consequences' to an examination of the rituals of research and how they interact with, solidify or challenge the meanings attached to race.

I acknowledge that researching race and race thinking is an important endeavour since race clearly stills matters, although importantly I also argue that as researchers we need to take cognisance of our own practices in this field. One way of doing this is to move beyond the present and ask ourselves how we envision the future or, more specifically, how our current research epistemologies and methodologies are writing future understandings of race. Undertaking this exercise requires reflection on the role of research as an agent for change, deliberate or consequential, in state institutions and policies. To open these debates I examine some of the theoretical underpinnings of race and race thinking, and then confront the challenges of moving these critical reflections into our research practices. Analysing how these play out and are reshaped in the micro context of the research process, in this paper through using ethnographic data from a case study in Albert Park, Durban, provides scholars with tools they can use to tackle the exciting but ethically challenging field of researching race in South Africa and elsewhere. In many ways these reflections aim to contribute towards the 'shift in orientation: both methodological and political', albeit from a researchers' perspective, that Erasmus' in her Editorial note points to in reconceptualising ideas on redress and transformation in South Africa.

### **Why race still matters**

With a colonial history soaked in racial codification (Seidman 1999:426) and subsequently entrenched by apartheid, it is not surprising that 16 years after the first democratic elections race still matters in South Africa. As apartheid built on and refined colonial and scientific discourses of difference, race was

chiselled into the everyday experiences of all South Africans. In South Africa today, race continues to be intertwined with thinking on culture, gender, language and income, among other social identities. That race still counts is also evident in the continued use of racial categories in state policies and data collection. In short, this form of taxonomy continues to ‘say something’ about our sense of Self and Other (although what that ‘something’ is, is widely contested). Race is not *always* an important identity in South Africa. However, the frequency with which race is used in state, media and popular discourses, and its embeddedness in social identities, often highlights it as the primary means through which South Africans interact and negotiate power relations and access to resources (Alexander 2007:92, Bouillon 2002:18). Apartheid is part of a living past: generations of South Africans alive today had first-hand experience of its violent oppression and unjust privileges. Furthermore, complex networks rooted in apartheid segregation continue to provide social and cultural capital, which in turn serves to nurture privilege, entrench poverty and reproduce ideas around racial difference. We need to remind ourselves that all people in South Africa, past and present, were and are profoundly shaped by the social engineering of its former racist state. Thus, it is important to understand how and why race continues to matter for projects of social justice and building a non-racial society.

Contemporary research into social inequalities and justice highlights how current state practices reinforce segregation by race. For example, government low-cost housing projects for the most part maintain the spatial mapping of apartheid (Murray 2008:101), nullifying opportunities for creating open and diverse spaces of interaction. Here, past and present structures synergise, enabling the solidification of racialised ontologies. A further example is the police accident report form inherited from the pre-1994 government, which continues to require ‘the race’ of both drivers despite insurers’ need for only a report number. This stowaway of the past is not innocent.<sup>4</sup> It reiterates that race matters in the present. It does this through demanding a dual performance of racial classification: firstly, it requires self-identifying from the reporter of the accident, indicating that race is a noteworthy part of one’s identity. Secondly, it requires labelling the other party, and here the reporter of the accident is given the expertise and authority to categorise another person. That both these performances are played out at an office of the state – the local police station – gives them the ‘legitimacy’ of a legal requirement.

Race is normalised through classification rituals in countless performances of everyday life. All South Africans are expected to tick one of at least four racial boxes on a variety of bureaucratic forms, including the census, university applications, medical records and accident reports. State requests for racial demographics from public and private institutions implicate staff in classification and data collection based on race. These practices parallel those of apartheid (Alexander 2007:100). Once again race is in the eye of the beholder, a gaze that continues to have profound consequences for people's lived experiences. Researchers engage in this practice when they target participants because of their perceived race, often as an attempt to 'represent' people's views in societies, sometimes in a blatant desire to make a claim about how 'black', 'white', 'indian' or 'coloured' people think, feel, act or select products for consumption.

That this box checking remains mostly unchanged and unchallenged suggests that for many South Africans this information is not just necessary but expected. The lesson for researchers today is carefully to think about how our present actions may create checkboxes for our future. If race mattered in the past, and matters now, how do we wish it to matter going forward? Exercises in imagining the future are part utopian thinking and part social engineering. This 'imagineering' demands reflexive research on race by scientists who are mindful of the possible future consequences of such categories.

### **The dilemmas of research I: theoretical debates**

A racialised ontology deploys a taxonomy of difference which distinguishes between humans by race. Despite scientific arguments against racial categories, and theories of race as socially constructed, race thinking shapes people's lived experiences and produces consequences as if it were real (Mason 1999:19). This construct shifts and reconstitutes itself through a multitude of power strategies depending on the social, political and economic milieus. Herein resides the complexity of researching race. Researchers face the difficult task of unpacking an ideology of difference that simultaneously incorporates discourses of science, biology, culture, religion, nationality, gender and class, as well as numerous other political, social and economic identities. Methodologies that isolate race as a facet of social identity (either in interviews or questionnaires) are troubled by attempts to untangle this variable from a complex relationship of variables. This multiplicity requires recognition that specific aspects of identity are not

always primary. Instead, it is important to understand the interconnectedness of multiple identities because isolating only one facet risks squashing people's lived experiences into narrow boxes and obscuring emergent identities.<sup>5</sup> This demands careful epistemological deliberation.

Racial categories construct powerful identities that mediate people's experience, produce structural frameworks in social institutions, and overtly and tacitly organise power in society (American Sociological Association 2003). Eliminating racial categories from research may limit social scientists' ability to expose unequal and unjust practices, or deprive the oppressed of viable political identities from which to rally against dominant and exclusionary ideologies and policies (Robotham 2005). Yet theoretical debates in this field have also called attention to the

[p]rocesses of essentialism and their uses in research [that] can be witnessed in the driving impetus to categorise the bodies, experiences, practices, and even the thoughts, of individuals and groups in relation to 'race' and ethnicity. (Gunaratnam 2003:29)

For example, is it sufficient for a researcher to state that race is a social construct, yet continue to identify participants as belonging to a 'race group'? Or to present findings that claim to represent the experiences of a 'racial grouping', without unpacking why, how and who benefits from maintaining these constructs? Acknowledging identities – for example 'whiteness' – as a continuous and fluid social process while securing data from an identified racialised individual – a 'white' person – tightens the screws that trap identity into the body politic (Nayak 2006:416). Recognising race as a social construct has done little to diminish the many essentialist performances of race in the economic, political, social and cultural arenas (Nayak 2006:412). A post-race theoretical stance thus asks the question, 'Can we do more?'

While post-race theory can be critiqued, not least because of the tautology implicit in its name, it demands reflection on current academic practices and asks a 'provocative question: can we re-write race into erasure?' (Nayak 2006:427). Acknowledging the interconnectivity of identities suggests that power relations and structures that create and feed inequalities also require a more holistic analysis. Using race as the lens to expose these practices and frameworks may in fact highlight only a few small elements of these mechanisms of power, or obscure significant causes of inequality (see Kate Lefko-Everett's article in this edition for a more detailed discussion on the possibilities of alternative indicators to measure inequality and

transformation). Methodologies for research into race or race thinking need to engage in a continuous process of critical reflection. They should also be open to new tools for understanding moments of identity construction *in situ*. A methodology of this kind could conceivably provide a more contextualised and embedded analysis of power relations, so strengthening researchers' ability to 'speak truth to power'. This has exciting political and social possibilities outside the realm of academia. For Gilroy, moving beyond race as any form of legitimate category opens up possibilities where 'action against racial hierarchies can proceed more effectively' (2000:13). South Africa is in a unique position in this regard, as '[t]he large area of overlap between "race" and "class" in South Africa makes this approach possible' (Alexander 2007:102).<sup>6</sup> For example, other primary indicators such as income group, or access to clean water, electricity and medical care, may be better indicators of areas requiring social and economic upliftment and infrastructure delivery than habitually recording racial statistics.

It is of course crucial to recognise that both intentional neglect *and* the insistence of difference cause extensive damage to individuals and groups within societies (Beall 1997:10). This is of particular concern in South Africa where there is discord between a state that presents itself as non-racial yet continues to preside over a nation that bears – to use Goldberg's (2009:529) term – a formal racial 'structural imprint'. It is important to stress here that the choice is not *between* exposing inequality and moving beyond race, but rather that '[w]e need to recognise and care about lived experiences of "race" and ethnicity, and we also need to resist and challenge the appetite for essentialism in research' (Gunaratnam 2003:34). Thinking in this way offers a valuable discussion about the way we conduct research, what we think we know, how we ask questions, and how we choose to write up and publish findings.

Many of the theoretical arguments presented above draw inspiration from a European setting and respond to discourses of multiculturalism and minorities in society, yet they are still relevant to South Africa. Here, the darkest side of race thinking lurks in the recent past. The present repetitive performances of race as meaningful difference (in policy, state institutions, advertising and communications, and social interactions) continue to create a disjuncture between the constitutional goal of non-racialism and everyday experience. In this context, social scientists cannot afford an uncritical agenda in their research on race. Seidman reminds us that '[a]t the individual level, we have remarkably little sense of how South Africans experienced,

responded to, or even challenged apartheid's rigid racial categories in their daily lives' (1999:434). This statement remains pertinent in contemporary South Africa; how are people in this new democracy experiencing, responding to or challenging the continuation of these racial categories in their daily lives? While exclusionary and essentialist practices and structures still exist within South Africa, there has also been change. The latter requires new epistemologies (Nuttall 2004:731) that move beyond research relying on racial categories, and that investigate how identities are reformulated in either rapidly or gradually transforming spaces. This will enable glimpses into possible future social relationships. Leaving this unexplored in favour of studying 'race relations' means losing opportunities for nurturing alternative and less essentialist experiences.

### ***The role of research***

Research that is open to these complexities offers important insights into how racialised identities are being dismantled or reconstituted in unanticipated ways. This in turn challenges and subverts the ontology of recognisable and differentiated 'races' and their use in state structures. Research on how and why race thinking is reproduced, transformed and/or subverted in the context of everyday lived experiences may initiate the first formative move away from a society where many micro and macro interactions are still mediated through a racial lens. One way that race may lose its saliency is through new commonalities being forged by emergent identities better suited to negotiating local, regional and global power networks. Pockets of this possibility were seen in the labour and anti-apartheid movements during the 1970s and 1980s, when at times race was rejected as a mechanism for mobilisation in favour of collectives protesting as 'students, workers, township residents, women' (Seidman 1999:428). Post-1994 South Africa has also seen large social movements mobilised around health and medical treatment, such as the Treatment Action Campaign.<sup>7</sup>

In a similar vein, authors such as Gilroy (2000) and Appiah (2005) call for a political philosophy of cosmopolitanism or planetary humanism. This philosophy recognises that new and existing forms of transglobal identities and movements build commonalities that dispel the myth of essential and fixed identities. These may be found in a reconstitution of the body through genetic technology, strong social and health movements such as those around HIV/AIDS, or international labour and environmental movements (Gilroy 2005:290). Looking to transnational movements as drivers of change

is a common feature in contemporary theory on race, ethnicity and nationalism. These movements are seen as crossing boundaries and therefore demystifying difference or, at the very least, reducing its potency as a useful political resource (Body-Gendrot 1998:855). For many theorists these ‘identities without borders’ are imbued with much hope to transform power relations in the contemporary global society. However, the extent to which they challenge racial categories in South Africa is debatable. Access to technologies and global information that enable these borderless identities is mediated by social standing and wealth. While they may offer some resistance, it is optimistic to leave this paradigmatic revolution to these forces alone, especially if pervasive race thinking continues in state and popular discourse. There is a strong argument to be made for state intervention to begin the dismantling of race. Alexander argues that

without denying the importance of contestation and initiative by subaltern groups, the state – especially the democratic state – has the paradigmatic prerogative, i.e., it sets the template on the basis of which social identities are fashioned. (2007:101)

Gilroy also argues for state responsibility in moving society towards cosmopolitan goals when he advocates that they are not only viable but demanded if we adhere to an ‘authentic democracy’ (2000:12). In essence, this proposition is built on a reinterpretation of liberalism and universalism, which also opens it to critique (Robotham 2005:565). Certainly, Gilroy is on shaky ground when he draws on a loosely defined notion of ‘authentic democracy’. However, he is correct to warn that both past and contemporary politics provide evidence that fighting racism while remaining in a racialised paradigm is untenable. Of course, state engineering can easily swing into dubious territory. It does, however, present an opportunity for radical change in a country where the state is actively engaged in nation building (Grest 2002:38). I am not advocating a nation-building project that forges a new meta-identity as a South African, which in itself may be a problematic activation of crude nationalism (Bouillon 2002:18, Peberdy 2001:27). Rather, I propose engineering social spaces for the emergence of cosmopolitan identities. Until now, the state has used non-racialism as a kind of window dressing, what Goldberg likens to the ‘emperor’s clothes’ that the ‘state wears to represent itself to the world’ (2009:532). While non-racialism is a much punted term in various documents and state rhetoric, there has been little dedication to publicly tackling the meaning behind this concept (Maré 2003:20). If the state can set ‘the template on the basis of which social

identities are fashioned' (Alexander 2007: 101), then it will have to do more than provide a weak umbrella concept of non-racialism, especially one that often appears in conflict with the multiracial vision of a 'rainbow nation'. What is needed is a political agenda that debunks essentialist thinking about individuals and collectives and reflects on how policies impact on existing heterogeneous spaces, creating or stifling cosmopolitan dialogues. It is here that research can offer important contributions.

The credibility and validity awarded to scientific knowledge, particularly in (but not restricted to) Western culture, makes it a powerful tool for sustaining social ideologies (Fay 1996:12, Barnes and Edge 1982:233). Therefore, it may well be a powerful tool to dismantle them. But scientific knowledge, or more precisely its focus, interpretation and use are always products of its social context. For example, Darwin's theory of evolution initially provoked a shift in thinking on human origins that took a liberal approach by focusing on our similarities and common ancestors. Later, it was injected with political undercurrents to quantify a hegemonic system of inequality and difference (Jones 1980:141). Similarly, contemporary genetic findings that indicate commonalities between all species, including humans, are tools that scientists use to validate their arguments about race (McCann-Mortimer et al 2004:412). There is also a rift between scientific and popular discourse on race, which suggests that changes in scientific knowledge may not immediately impact on popular understandings of race.

Besides the multilayered ideological and structural barriers to accessing and distributing scientific knowledge, the real difficulty in challenging the paradigm of race lies in the conflicting ideologies between science and lived experience (Stepan 2003:337). This is not surprising given that race, and specifically racism, is informed by different historical ideologies and not by science alone. Scientific findings are integrated into popular understandings *if* they verify everyday experiences. Dubow (1995:9) illustrates that the existence of a (largely inaccessible) body of scientific knowledge during apartheid was valuable for 'white' South Africans, allowing them to buy into beliefs about their superiority. The discord between new scientific information on similarities, and lived realities in a stratified society, results in reproducing and reshaping older discourses of difference. This is done by reinterpreting new scientific information to fit into apartheid racial categories, or constructing explanatory models of difference based on culture, language and/or nationality. In South Africa, where a solid argument could be made that racialising society before and under apartheid was an economic project

to create a highly rigid class system (Seidman 1999:423), changes in scientific discourse may have little impact unless coupled with changes in economic structures. Abundant inequalities continue to follow the racialised blueprint of apartheid (Alexander 2007:99), reiterating daily how race appears to correlate with people's economic standing and social experiences. For South Africa, moving beyond race requires a Herculean shift in social belief, practice and structure (Posel et al 2001:xiii). Without state commitment to these goals, science alone holds little agency for change.

However, it is not prudent to write off the revolutionary potential of scientific knowledge. While it may not be the Achilles heel in race thinking, it can challenge it in profound ways. Scientific findings offer credibility and validity for policies and projects that attempt to shift essentialist paradigms, providing a resource for addressing the current use of race in the social, economic and political domains. These findings offer useful insights for more self-reflective state policies and planning that acknowledges their impact on people's ideologies of difference and commonality. One imaginable future is a form of state-supported thinking where Hall's assertion becomes a popular premise from which to negotiate social interaction:

we are all complexly constructed through different categories, of different antagonisms, and these may have the effect of locating us socially in multiple positions of marginality and subordination, but which do not operate on us in exactly the same way. (1991:57)

Making a conscious and ethical decision to drive this change requires understanding how people's lived experiences use various social identities and state apparatuses to both reaffirm and debunk racial identities. Social science research should offer insights into how and why racial classifications are used in the many informal interactions of everyday life, and communicate how micro and macro understandings of race intersect, contest and reinforce one another.

An important starting point in critically analysing race thinking in micro interactions is to consider how these theoretical debates get played out in the research process. Work that offers insights into what these debates mean and demand in the process of carrying out research and collecting data is scarce (Howarth 2009:408). The possibilities for effecting change lie not only in contributing to self-reflective state policies and planning, but also to self-reflective social science and research findings, where we can shift consciousness in ourselves and those with whom we interact in our research. Here self-reflection on how we go about our investigations means we can

start to challenge essentialist thinking through the micro interactions and dialogues between researcher and participant, and between writer and reader. It is to these drivers of change that I now turn.

### **The dilemmas of research II: the micro context**

While we may critique the continued use of racial categories in post-apartheid South Africa, it is also vital to acknowledge that these

social identities seem to have a primordial validity for most individuals, precisely because they are not aware of the historical, social and political ways in which their identities have been constructed. (Alexander 2007:93)

If we agree with this, then research into race can be a consciousness-raising exercise, at least for the researchers but perhaps also for participants and the wider public. Research that looks at how and why race is constructed in specific ways within a research location – rather than taking perceived racial difference between participants, and between researcher and participants, as givens – offers possibilities for revealing what lies behind the agendas of racialised thought and action. As researchers, being more critical of our research processes forces us to tackle the epistemological complexities of how race thinking can shape those processes. The next section raises some of the dilemmas and questions that arise when integrating critical theoretical thinking on race into the research process. It tackles some of the issues around how we ask questions, select our participants, and the meanings we attach to our own identity in research settings.

#### ***How we ask questions***

Social scientists interested in methodology have long warned about the necessity of critically reflecting on how we ask questions. This awareness needs to extend to thinking about the broader context of social identities within a specific research project. For example, in South Africa the problem of linking questions to race is not that researchers should be colour-blind or afford race no meaning. Rather, it is that race is *so loaded* with meaning that it may distort people's views and opinions in relation to the research topic. Friedman and Erasmus (2008:65) give an example of this when they analyse how survey answers differed in relation to redress and transformation when associated with race and class respectively. For example, 'white' participants supported redress to uplift poorer sectors of society but not if redress was associated with race. While this finding points to the complex

meanings some participants attached to race, it also shows that if you wish to explore people's feelings about transformation you need to think carefully about how you ask questions. Without testing or critically reflecting on how race may skew responses, findings may not reflect the complexity of a topic. The banality of race in South Africa means that too often race is inserted or implied in questions without much thought to how it influences answers.

This also applies to qualitative methodologies. Direct questions on 'race relations' and racial identities cannot escape the historical and contemporary meanings placed on what it means to be perceived as 'black', 'white', 'indian' and 'coloured' in South Africa, but also, on what it means to talk about race. When directly questioned on racial issues, participants may carefully monitor the research agenda and the researcher's attitude, adjusting their responses in a bid to be seen as politically correct rather than reveal what they actually think about race. Narrowing the scope of enquiry to talking directly about racial identities also excludes a better understanding of how multi-identities are interwoven. I believe that basing interviews on a broader topic generates richer empirical data and lowers the risk of participants monitoring their responses. It is no longer sufficient to define race thinking and racism as overt social practices or structures. Recognition is required of the embedded way in which these ideologies are enacted in society. Providing an open dialogue in which people can discuss their experiences enables various social identities to emerge as important mechanisms through which people negotiate their social environments. Methodologies that offer these possibilities enable researchers to analyse why race is used in some answers and not others, providing more nuanced understandings of which ideologies and structures enable or shape race thinking. Adjusting questions to be more open, as suggested here, requires a fairly straightforward methodological reshaping. However, critically analysing how we select participants is a far more challenging task.

### ***Selecting participants***

In South Africa, the temptation to select research participants as representatives of a 'race group' is strong. This is not just because race matters, but because this type of thinking is driven by a desire for social inclusion and justice. With a history of exclusion and discrimination based on race, there can be hypersensitivity towards making sure everyone has a voice. As noted, race as a research category is still supported in various ways, and continues to exist in many funding criteria (Gunaratnam 2003:45).

Presenting data that offer simplified categories can also be seen as useful for policy-makers, as opposed to the more messy interplay of variables experienced in everyday life. And of course race makes for good media headlines, especially in South Africa. As Burawoy (2005:260) points out, academic fields can start to become more about ‘a battery of disciplinary techniques...and then policing one’s colleagues and successors to make sure we all march in step’, rather than about critically moving beyond the confines of epistemological comfort. These occupational pressures of doing research mean that what was experienced as a fluid interaction of multiple identities between two or more individuals during the research process may become fixed in ink as representing the way ‘race groups’ experience the world or each other.

While the desire to ‘see’ race is more reparative than punitive in some of these cases, it still does not sufficiently reflect on the dilemma of what happens when you leave the layer of theoretical abstraction and move into the more messy process of identifying a participant. Neglecting to explain how the researcher moved ‘from the claim that “race” was a popular interpretative category of lay life to the empirical identification of “racial groups”’ serves to reinforce racial groupings as ‘naturally occurring’ (Carter and Virdee 2008:662). Again the banal performance of racial categorisation is repeated. Here researchers use the taught social clues and visual distinctions that Gilroy (2000:42) talks about to select people they think belong to a racial group. Researchers need to be more cognisant that using fixed racial categories ‘tend[s] to create and reinforce the identity of population groups that they were initially only meant to observe’ (Christopher 2002:406). In his article on historically analysing the classification of groups in the South African census, Christopher suggests that shifting the responsibility (or control) of defining the self away from the researchers and placing it in the hands of the participants ‘may accelerate the emergence of new identities’ (2002:406). The possibility of opening future alternatives is an attractive one, provided it is pushed beyond simply shifting the responsibility on to participants by making them check their own racial box. Some researchers may feel that allowing participants to self-identify exempts them from the awkward process of classification. It does not: ticking an option on a given list still elicits a repetitive racial performance and serves to inform participants that whatever they say will be measured against their racial identity. It is the opening up or removal of classification boxes that offers alternative and more in-depth ways of seeing our social world. As noted, in some cases race

may be an important concept related to research. However, in *all* cases an explanation of why the research required this variable, and of the epistemology of identification of participants, should be common practice. It is not acceptable for race to be taken as a given that requires little conceptual analysis in social science research. Researchers need to illustrate a critical awareness of how the abstraction of race interacts with their own practices of engagement.

Ethnographic methods offer useful tools for finding alternative and less confining ways to identify participants. These methods provide the necessary flexibility and data to examine the discord between academic theory and research practice, and between official discourses of race and lived experiences. Nayak believes that '[t]his is because it is only by engaging in the complicated clutter of daily life that race can be subverted, crossed over and perhaps eventually crossed out' (2006:427). I argue that many other methods, once revisited with a more critical epistemological eye, could effectively do the same.<sup>8</sup> However, the process-driven nature of ethnography undeniably offers a more dynamic space in which to explore new ways of reflecting on the self, identifying participants and gathering data.

Here I draw from my own ethnographic research in the city space of Albert Park in Durban. As a way of familiarising myself with the area and the people who live there, I moved into a high-rise flat in the area for nine months. After that, I continued to spend time there for a year, sitting on a fold-up chair outside a small fruit and vegetable stall. Rather than creating a predetermined checklist of possible participants, certain residents became people of interest through my everyday interactions with them. Living there also reduced the temptation to connect with a 'representative' sample from different racial groups. I did not approach people for interviews because they were 'white', 'black', 'indian' or 'coloured', or male or female. Rather, I approached them because, for example, they worked on the street and watched its goings-on from Monday to Friday during the day, or because they acted as gatekeeper to resident spaces, or ran an infamous tavern down the road. Here, what Essed (2001:504) calls secondary levels of identification are also acknowledged as important aspects of researching social identities. This is not to say that these participants do not use racial categories or draw on other macro social identities of age, gender, occupation and class in their understandings, philosophising and interactions in this urban space. But ethnographic methods do enable the micro identities of shopkeeper, flat supervisor and tavern owner to pull through and offer an explanation other

than race for certain ways of seeing and acting in the world. Opening up research to the possibilities of evolving identities in heterogeneous spaces, while remaining alert to how race plays into these – although never presupposing the meaning attached to race – offers a far more nuanced understanding of how people both draw on and disrupt identities in multiple strategies of sense making and survival. This approach is particularly beneficial for research located in urban areas where social identities interact on a myriad of levels, and reformulate, dissipate or materialise in response to each other (Beall 1997:3).

### ***Thinking about the self***

Ethnography also provides a space for researchers to reflect on how their social identity impacts on participants' interactions and responses. Rhodes states that while still important to take into consideration,

the significance of skin colour was rarely the same from start to finish of an interview and more was gained from considering it as an interactive factor in the dynamic context of each interview than from attempting to isolate it as a variable. (cited in Nayak 2006:425)

This understanding forces the researcher to move beyond the dilemma of reifying 'racial' classifications. In this sense social identity is viewed as part of an ethnographic process rather than a given that exists exogenous to the interaction between researcher and participant. This is not to say that while living in Albert Park my being perceived as 'white' had no relevance. In some ways and spaces I felt it did, but as Ware puts it, if there is something worth analysing here '[i]t is not about *being* a white woman, it is about *being thought of* as a white woman' (1992:xii, emphasis in original).

A morning I spent with Priscilla, one of the Albert Park participants, illustrates both the benefit and difficulty of shifting the analytical focus in the direction proposed by Ware, when race appears to offer part of the analytical process. Priscilla and I had had numerous informal conversations on the street but after a more formal interview session in her flat she asked me to give her a lift to the sheriff's office. She wanted to collect a deposit she had put down on an unsuccessful bid on a flat for auction. The sheriff's office had held her money for over a year and the clerk dealing with her deposit constantly avoided her phone calls or was on leave, in short preventing Priscilla from earning interest on her money. When we arrived at the sheriff's office, she indicated that she wanted me to come inside with her and gestured for me to follow her to the counter. I stood next to her while she negotiated

for a cheque. At first the clerk suggested that they would do an electronic transfer into her bank account, but she refused to leave without a cheque. When he responded that that would take time, she asked me in front of him if we could wait, to which I agreed. After 20 minutes she left with her money. On the drive back she was really happy and appreciative that I had taken her there and back. She told me that because I had helped her, she would in turn help me if I needed anything. In Albert Park, reciprocity is synonymous with trust and from then on Priscilla and I had a far more open relationship. During the drive back she also told me they must have wondered who I was. I joked and said that I could be her lawyer. Immediately she smiled and agreed: ‘You see, maybe that is what they thought’. The tone of her voice suggested that this is exactly what she had banked on (Field note May 26, 2010).

But what was it about my presence that Priscilla thought would lend weight to her cause? What did she anticipate the clerk would read into my being there? I am at least two generations younger than her; usually a younger person would not be seen to hold any authority over the more experienced older person, so why did Priscilla (and I) think that I may be perceived as legal counsel? One possible interpretation is that Priscilla assumed that the clerk would make racialised assumptions. In South Africa I would be labelled ‘white’, and she may have played on the fact that the clerk would assume that a relationship between us, especially considering the age gap, would be a professional rather than a personal one. Here ‘whiteness’ intersects with class, as it is historically associated with better access to education and professional careers (Seekings 2008:4). Of course, that she perceives me as ‘white’ only holds currency because I am contrasted against her own racial classification. In other words, if race enters the analysis it is because in South Africa we are labelled, and can label each other, as different. Using race as an explanatory tool in analysing this situation means that I too would have to recognise that Priscilla is labelled differently to me. Growing up in South Africa means that I am acutely aware of the visual cues and social indicators used to classify people. I presume that Priscilla is *classified* (rather than *is*) ‘black’. My presumption lies in assessing her skin tone, which is darker than mine, in listening to her speak (she is fluent in isiZulu and English) and because she told me that she grew up in a township outside of Durban. Here I perform the classification rituals of apartheid. I look at her body, I listen to her language and I assess her upbringing and then place her in a category that is meant to represent her. She of course has done the same with me. That as people living in South Africa we can do this is testimony

to the prevalence of race thinking.

On first reading, the above practice of classification in my own work may appear awkward and contradictory considering the earlier theoretical analysis. Yet it is important to include for a number of reasons. Firstly, it highlights the difficulty of researching race without performing it yourself, a difficulty researchers need to grapple with rather than ignore. Secondly, rather than researchers simply assigning a racial category to a participant, a transparent description needs to be given of how the researcher identifies people and how people use various strategies to construct race. These can in turn be problematised. This requires thinking about how the researcher helps to produce race rather than merely providing a description of it. Lastly, what it asks is that the researcher analyse why at this particular moment their own or another's classification becomes important. The above example suggests that people are able to abstract racial stereotypes from an individual and use them for very specific livelihood strategies, while simultaneously discarding them during other micro-level interactions. That race becomes part of the analytical process within an institutional context is of vital importance. It is in making an official query in a formal state building that 'whiteness' in South Africa may be seen to accrue status and privilege. Priscilla's success in retrieving her money when she had been unsuccessful in the past reconfirms the lived reality of institutional racism. It is in investigating these points of interaction with state structures that social science may offer possibilities for more inclusive state projects. This offers far more insight into how race is constructed through dialogue with other individuals and institutions than by emphasising *being* 'white' or 'black' (in my opinion an impossible state to occupy).

## **Conclusion**

Rather than offering any definitive solution to the complexities of doing research on race and race thinking in society, I have raised more questions and called for deeper reflection. Neither have I offered an alternative to the use of racial categories in research. Instead, I have emphasised where the analytical focus of research on race should lie – on the complexities, awkwardness and ethical dilemmas of researching in this field. Analysis of this kind requires engagement with how the broader theoretical discussions in the field of race and race thinking shape the research process, and how it in turn reshapes our theoretical understandings of this social construct. Reflecting critically on the role of research presents possibilities to address

and dismantle tangible and intangible frameworks that support race thinking and its inevitable relative, racism. Of course, I ask for more than that. We should take seriously the responsibility of social science to challenge and construct future possibilities for thinking about race, and consider the possibilities and value of its erasure. However, this is not to suggest jumping directly to a post-race agenda or finding another conclusive alternative classification device. Instead, what is called for is debate and action on beginning the process of moving away from essentialised racial categories in research and policy. It is in the process of *moving* – a process that demands critical reflections and asks hard questions – that we may begin the important journey towards more inclusive, heterogeneous and open spaces in South Africa.

## Notes

1. I do not place inverted commas around the word ‘race’ in this paper as the content clearly illustrates that race is a social construct and not a given biological or cultural category into which people can be slotted. I do, however, place inverted commas around racial categories such as ‘white’, ‘black’, ‘indian’ and ‘coloured’, or when the word ‘race’ denotes an act of classification itself, such as referring to a ‘race group’. The inverted commas here are a reminder that treating individuals as representatives or members of a group that has been assigned homogeneous and essentialist characteristics is problematic and contested.
2. I use the term ‘race thinking’ as being synonymous with racial ontologies or racialism, where the starting premise is the belief that all humans can be categorised according to a given racial type or group. While the notion of which groups of people form a ‘race’, and the essentialist characteristics attributed to racial groups change depending on the social context, the core belief in separate ‘race groups’ underpins all these social variations. Ontology I believe best describes the strength and prevalence of race thinking in South Africa.
3. The South African Constitution can be viewed at <http://www.info.gov.za/documents/constitution/1996/96cons1.htm>.
4. Goldberg (2009:515) talks about the ‘haunting of the new South Africa by race’, but I prefer to think of these past objects as more tangible agents since they continue to affect and infect structures and institutes rather than appearing as troublesome ghosts.
5. See Essed for an analysis of how even anti-racist movements concerned with equality and eradicating racism can fall into this trap of squeezing social experiences through a racial prism. Not only does this stifle the aim of social justice, but ‘[o]ne-sided emphasis on only race or ethnicity underscores the very determinism that is characteristic of racism in the first place’ (2001:498).

6. For a more nuanced exploration of some of the problematic and strategic integrations of class and race in South Africa, see Maré (2003:15).
7. Interestingly, the activist networks and discourses of human rights formed during the anti-apartheid movement in South Africa provided an efficient and effective base from which to mobilise protest campaigns for the TAC (Friedman and Mottiar 2005:532).
8. Friedman and Erasmus (2008) offer an example of how this criticality could be integrated into quantitative research.

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