

Debate

Non-racialism isn't in the future of South Africa: towards a pessimistic view of race in South Africa

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Abstract

There is a consensus amongst many South African scholars, activists, human rights advocates, and citizens that South Africa should become a non-racial society. So strong is our collective belief in a non-racial society in the future of South Africa that we have this principle inscribed in the founding provisions of our Constitution. As an ideal, it stands as a guiding principle in the virtues and values promoted in our society. Arguments abound in the literature for why non-racialism is a noble and worthy cause, but little attention is given to the question of if the attainment of such a society is possible. If non-racialism is a state in which we no longer think about race, I argue that such a state is probably not in the future of South Africa. In this article, I ask what should be done if the attainment of such a non-racial society is not possible. Particularly, I ask if the strategy of racial eliminativism is useful in the endeavour towards a more racially just society if racial thinking will persist despite any of our efforts to move past the idea of race.

1. Introduction: the political utopia of non-racialism

So, what is this seduction? What is the hold that this idea has on us? Why, as Abu El-Haj (2007) similarly asks, is it that our theories of racelessness, both in their social science and biological evocations, as powerful as they are, are so hard to realise, both in our social analysis and in the way in which we manage our relationships with each other? Why have these theories struggled to enter our social imaginaries? (Soudien 2012:21)

There is a consensus by some South African scholars, activists, human rights advocates, and citizens that South Africa should become a non-racial society (eg Frederikse 2016 [1991]). Many South African political

icons such as Steve Biko and Nelson Mandela or Ruth First and Rick Turner preached non-racialism (Thompson 2013). Recognising that race ‘is not *always* an important identity in South Africa’ (Erwin 2012:95), Erwin asks the important question that if ‘race mattered in the past, and matters now, how do we wish it to matter going forward?’ (2012:96). Specifically in the South African context, Alexander recounted world hopes that ‘the post-apartheid dispensation will show the world that it is possible to open the way towards the realisation of the dream of a raceless, perhaps even a classless, society’ (Alexander 2006:2). A ‘raceless’ society is sometimes what is taken to be what a non-racial society would be like (Maré 2014, Soudien 2012, Blum 2015). Non-racialism, as I understand the term and how I argue the term should be understood, is a state in which the race to which a person purportedly belongs is irrelevant to their social, psychological, and material well-being – it is not necessarily a state in which races do not exist.

Either way, non-racialism is a kind of imagined ideal or a political utopia – it is an exercise in ‘imagining the future [that is] part utopian thinking and part social engineering’ (Erwin 2012:96). As with any ideal or political utopia, its moral and ethical status as a normative principle setting out a goal worth striving for and working towards can be affirmed and supported without it necessarily being attainable. For example, the case for peace on earth can be made and work done towards its attainment without having to have the explicit belief that such a state of affairs is ultimately possible.

One strategy proposed towards realising non-racialism in South Africa is the idea of racial eliminativism. Racial eliminativism comes in a few varieties (Appiah 1996, Posel 2001: 110, Maré 2014). The eliminativism of interest to me in this article is the idea of apartheid racial category eliminativism proposed as a viable and pragmatic strategy against a racialised South Africa (Posel 2001:110, Alexander 2006:11, Benatar 2010, Ncayiyana 2012, Erasmus 2012, Maré 2014, Blum 2015). The argument is that the continued use of racial terminology perpetuates the very racial structures it is dealing with and fighting against (Posel 2001:110, Benatar 2010, Ncayiyana 2012, Erasmus 2012, Maré 2014, Blum 2015); some argue that it even creates unjust counter-discriminatory practices such as quotas in university admissions policies (Benatar 2008, Benatar 2010, Erasmus 2010, Ncayiyana 2012, Hall and Woermann 2014).

What is argued is that the ‘open-ended use of apartheid “race” categories as a way to achieve transformation is problematic and ultimately self-defeating’ because it ‘perpetuates and institutionalises apartheid “group think” and identity, and promotes division by linking benefit – or the withholding thereof – to membership of a group rather than to the disadvantage it seeks to redress’ (Ncayiyana 2012:193). More generally, the claim is that ‘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’ (Erwin 2012:98). It is common for proponents of this view to claim that by ‘using the shorthand of “race”... we also entrench – avoidably – the very racial categories that undermine the possibility of attaining a truly non-racial democratic South Africa’ (Alexander 2006:11). It is maintained that if, ‘as Paul Gilroy argues, “action against racial hierarchies can proceed more effectively when it has been purged of any lingering respect for the idea of race” (2000:13), then the residues of apartheid’s racial categories remain a daunting obstacle to the pursuit of a nonracial democracy in South Africa’ (Posel 2001:110).

Some basic claims that can be made on behalf of these arguments are that (1) racial terminology promotes racial thinking, (2) that racial terminology underlies many racial practices, and (3) doing away with racial terminology and its ‘classificatory practices’ will solve if not at least alleviate some of our social issues in regards to race.

Although well-reasoned arguments have been put forward for this position, it lacks key evidential support for its conclusion about the role of racial classificatory schemes and the possibility of us doing away with them completely (see section 2). A more discriminating look at the role of racial classification seems to suggest that eliminativist views overestimate the role which formalised racial classification has played in the unfolding of racial practices in society at various levels, interpersonal and institutional. Consequentially, the view may also be overestimating the possible consequences of an intervention aimed specifically at eliminating racial classification and the use of racial terminology in everyday talk and in social policy. Evidence from evolutionary psychology also seems to suggest that the eliminativist view may be underestimating the resilience of racial classificatory practices irrespective of the use of racial terminology. In the next section, I discuss how racial thinking – a

precondition for the use of racial terminology for any particular purposes – is far more resilient than the classificatory schemes of the last two centuries or the present shape of our racial classificatory practices. I look at this case to show that racial thinking is not merely a feature of our language or that of a particular culture; rather, I explore the issue of how classification by superficial characteristics or assumed ancestry is a possibly innate predisposition in humans which they use intuitively to sort and understand their living world.

An obvious retort against the belief that the elimination of Apartheid racial categories would help undo the racialisation that came with apartheid classification is that racial injustice in South Africa precedes apartheid by a few centuries (Terreblanche 2002, Dollery 2003) and that the racial classifications used in South Africa have changed significantly over time (Christopher 2011, Posel 2001, Khalfani and Zuberi 2001). This is taken as the consensus view: racial issues in South Africa predate apartheid classificatory schemes (see Posel 2001). So although apartheid racial classification was used as a technology to codify and systematise racial classification for the purpose of discrimination, racial issues precede apartheid classification. The use of apartheid racial terminology has surely been of monumental significance in the achievement of racist and colonialist objectives in South Africa (Posel 2001), but we need to ask ourselves if classification is a cause or is symptomatic of other facts and factors – both social and psychological. The problem may be in the fact that we may tend to think in racial terms along with the fact that we have internalised ‘racial practices’ and values related to classificatory schemes rather than the issue hinging on the existence and use of racial terminology as a classificatory scheme.¹

Those who advocate for the elimination of racial categories have argued that their racial eliminativism can do much good in efforts towards racial justice (Gilroy 2000, Root 2000, Maré 2014, Benatar 2010), often applying this argument directly to the use of apartheid racial terminology in institutional and policy contexts (Benatar 2010, Ncayiyana 2012, Erasmus 2012, Maré 2014).

This doctrine of the elimination of racial terminology assumes that doing away with racial terms and practices can help do away with racialised ways of thinking (Root 2000:636-8, Ncayiyana 2012, Erasmus 2012). There is experimental evidence for the influence of different kinds of racial terminologies on people’s attitudes towards social justice and

racial inequality, and so there exist real social and moral dangers as to how racial terminologies are used if they are to be used at all (Williams and Eberhardt 2008, Donovan 2016a, Donovan 2016b). The long social history of race (see Isaac 2006) and the possible evolutionary origins of racial thinking (see Machery and Faucher 2005) suggests that we may be predisposed to classificatory thinking which, when applied to human diversity, can result in the multiplicity of racial classificatory schemes we have come up with around the world. Cross-cultural studies show that even societies thought not to have ostensibly racial classificatory terminology in their languages, such as some peoples in Latin America (eg Brazil), still think in racial terms about their communities (Mallon 2013:83–86). When taking into account not only our normative commitments about non-racialism but also the facts and constraints that we may have about how humans work on a cognitive level, the eliminativist view may begin to seem naïve in its optimism about what can be achieved by challenging the use of racial terminology (over and above our challenging other overtly racial practices).

If we swing from our optimism about what can be achieved by eliminativism to a pessimism motivated by what is known about racial thinking in humans, we would also have to take seriously the possibility that we may never be able to have a truly non-racial society if a non-racial society is one in which racial thinking does not feature. If racial thinking is far more pervasive and persistent than its recent false biological and cultural incarnations, then race may be with us far into the future and a non-racial society without the recognition of races out of reach.

The growing body of evidence for the pervasiveness and persistence of racial thinking in the literature, mainly from studies of history (Jones 2009, Lape 2010, Isaac 2013) and evolutionary psychology (Gelman and Hirschfeld 1999, Machery and Faucher 2005, Mallon 2010), suggest that racial thinking could be with us indefinitely. We may be as pessimistic as to believe that ‘the ideology of race, or ‘racism’, [will persistently emerge] whenever the political and social circumstances make it functionally pertinent’ (Nash 1972:113) so that the question of race will always remain a recurring sociopolitical issue with more or less significance depending on the social context.

If such views claiming that ‘it is a fact that racialised identities... have genocidal potential’ (Alexander 2006:2) or that ‘racial constructs are always intricately tied up with power and discrimination’ (Erwin 2011:14)

are correct, it may be the case that we have the moral responsibility to keep an eye on race if we cannot destroy it. Gradualist approaches to racial eliminativism insist that current interest in race should be in service of its eventual destruction or elimination along with the racial practices that accompany it (Appiah 1996, Maré 2014) which implies the affirmative to the question of if we can ‘re-write race into erasure’ (Nayak 2006:427). The pessimistic view about race I am putting forward here, in parallel to arguments about human psychology, imply that the idea of race cannot be rewritten into an ‘erasure’ because the basis of racial thinking is not a completely social choice even if its meanings, value, and uses are socially determined.

If this is correct, eliminativism as a position towards racial justice is a non-starter. Eliminativism about race is a non-starter if racial thinking can be shown to be a stable human affliction not arising out of one culture or another but rather as being a cognitive predisposition in humans introduced earlier in human cognitive evolution (Mallon 2013, Machery and Faucher 2005).² Although this may not bring the goal of non-racialism into question, the possibility of the persistence of racial thinking restrains what strategies are theoretically plausible and, consequentially, what strategies are sustainable, pragmatic, and capable of moving us closer towards our desired goals. Insights into the nature of race can challenge the viability of eliminativism as a normative and as a metaphysical position, if not completely undermine it in both domains (see Haslanger 2012:306, Haslanger 2000). In this call for debate, I look at some reasons to believe that eliminativism about race in South Africa is undermined by the nature of race and its continued relevance as a phenomenon of interest to social scientists. My main argument to this affect is that race is not a creation of the social scientist but is rather a set of phenomena they investigate due to their sociohistorical instantiation that is in some significant ways independent of the practices of the social scientist (see section 3). The argument is that although the practices of racial terminological use may contribute to the awareness of race in society (as argued by Root 2000), it is at the same time the study of a set of phenomena that contribute to the reality of race in ways that are now independent of our acknowledgment or maintenance of racial concepts.

In section 2, I outline why racial thinking is probably here to stay and why the elimination of racial thinking through the elimination of racial terminology is implausible. I lay the groundwork for arguing how it is that

traditional racial practices can continue in the absence of racial classificatory terminology being used on the cognitive level by looking at studies of race in Latin America. More importantly, on the social level, in the third section I argue that sociohistorical factors influencing the present realities of South African demographics make races socially real entities. Although the arguments in sections 2 and 3 can operate independently of one another, I incorporate them to show just how unlikely eliminativism is. I end in suggesting an opposing view to eliminativism in light of the findings in section 2 and in light of the work social scientists see themselves as doing. I suggest that under pessimistic circumstances we should rather take a retentionist position on race that is revised in the long run in light of changes in how racial classifications are being used (or not used) in a particular time, context, and society.

2. Why the success of gradualism about racial elimination is implausible

The received view in the social sciences is that racial thinking is a relatively new phenomenon that appeared as a unique historical event in the modern West (Mallon 2013),³ a view repeated in the South African literature on the subject (eg Erwin 2011:14-15, Soudien 2013:20, Maré 2014). The implication of this view is that if race is a cultural invention of modern origin and use, it can be abandoned through our cultural collective choices (see Soudien 2012). Gradualism about the elimination of races assumes that it is possible to eliminate racial thinking and its classificatory schemes and practices. This is usually on the assumption that racial thinking is a cultural invention.

This thought has two components. The first component is the idea that we are observing a new way of thinking about people – ie racial thinking is a modern novelty. This is the conceptual break hypothesis. The second component is the idea that this new way of thinking – racial thinking – began in about the late eighteenth to early nineteenth century in European-American traditions. This is the historical emergence of racial essentialism hypothesis, or what Mallon calls the HERE hypothesis for short. The HERE hypothesis is a formulation of the conceptual break hypothesis as it is popularly expressed in the literature (Mallon 2013:77–80).

In this section, I will be looking at evidence suggesting racial categorisation may be an innate predisposition in humans.⁴

2.1 Racial thinking and lineage essentialism

The claims of the conceptual break hypothesis can be distilled in the statement that racial essentialism is a modern invention of the West (ie the conceptual break comes with the invention of the ‘scientific racism’ of eighteenth to nineteenth century European-American thinking from which racial thinking is purported to have begun). Racial essentialism, as Mallon defines it, maintains that:

racess differed not only in superficial properties like skin color, hair type, or body morphology, but also in possession of some perhaps unseen property that (1) was (at least causally) necessary and sufficient for membership in the race (2) explained typical features of the race (3) was passed on from parents to children. (Mallon 2013:78)

Race is thus identified in terms of essentialism about lineage. The passing down of particular traits or features purportedly shared by only a sub-population of humanity are said to create the exclusive sub-groups called races. This way of thinking about differences is described by Mallon as ‘broad essentialism’. Broad essentialism is not an explicitly worked out metaphysical theory. Rather, it is the intuitive pattern of essentialist thinking displayed by people in their reasoning about presumed kinds – specifically, in their reasoning about biological differences and their categorisation of living things into kinds. Mallon’s broad essentialism is thus a kind of ‘folk (biological) essentialism’ (Mallon 2013:78).

This folk essentialism is distinct from the explicit metaphysical theories of biological kinds that emerged in the nineteenth century that characterise some forms of racialism and ‘scientific racism’. Those metaphysical theories were couched in scientific theories explaining why biological kinds were thought to be exclusive. Folk essentialism does not need to have a background theory explaining how or why essentialism is said to be the case. Broad essentialism, as a kind of folk essentialism, is a prescientific notion of – or belief in – essences (Gelman and Hirschfeld 1999).

Mallon argues that lineage essentialism is possibly a constitutive feature of racial thinking. The idea of lineage is straight-forward. It is the idea that progeny comes from its parents and that parents also come from their own parents – importantly, in regards to racial thinking, lineage essentialism means that racial features or traits are passed down exclusively from parents to children so that any characteristic racial trait of any member of a race can be traced through the lineage. Racial traits, in this

sense, are meant to be exclusive to lineages.

Mallon recounts evolutionary psychological studies that have found evidence suggesting that lineage essentialism is a general feature of human thinking. These studies suggest that people are predisposed to think in essentialist terms about biological kinds (Mallon 2013:80-83).

To propose that this folk essentialism is an innate feature of our cognitive functioning, Mallon looked at studies of young children who, it must be assumed for his examples to work, had not received much instruction about reasoning on biological differences but were rather using their own general cognitive capacities to navigate tasks of categorisation. Mallon recounts these studies in favour of the idea that children are broad essentialists that subscribe to a lineage essentialism about biological kinds which they transpose to the categorisation of perceived human differences.

A central point is that children displayed an essentialism about biological group membership. The category to which an organism belonged was dependent on the membership or category which the parents of the organism in question belonged. This was the case even when the offspring of a particular animal was made to have features and traits that mimicked those of other animals. Under these conditions, children refused the possibility that the animal in question could ‘transform’ from one kind of animal into another. Mallon reports that:

in one study, Frank Keil showed that 3-5 year old preschoolers judged that while a costume can make a zebra appear to be a horse, the horse-costume-wearing zebra nonetheless remains a zebra (1989:chap 11). In another study, Keil showed that by 8 to 10 years old, children judge that even scientists surgically altering a raccoon to make it seem like a skunk fail to change its kind identity. (Mallon 2013:81)

In relation to reasoning about race, Mallon draws out three basic principles that this way of thinking follows. The first is the causal sufficiency of parents of having a child of the same race as themselves – that is, parents of one race have a child of the same race. The second is that only genuine ‘*k*’s come from genuine ‘*k*’s which means a genuine ‘*k*’ cannot come from any other type. The third is that racial membership is explanatory – “‘*k*’s typically have certain properties because they are ‘*k*’s” (Mallon 2013:82). In these studies:

we see the first in, for example, a refusal to allow that certain sorts of transformations (eg costumes, or cross-species adoption) can confer a

new kind membership on an individual even when transforming its kind-typical properties... And we see the second again in the insistence that superficially transformed individuals retain their original kind membership. (Mallon 2013:82)

Mallon explains that many ‘theorists in the psychological literature seem to pair broad essentialism and inheritance thinking in a straightforward way’ (Mallon 2013:82). The pairing of broad essentialism with inheritance thinking, as I discussed above, is lineage essentialism. Lineage essentialism about race is racial essentialism (Mallon 2013:82). Lineage essentialism with regards to race is the idea that race is heritable.

Lineage essentialism is at the core of much race thinking. Lineage essentialism, in this way of thinking, purports to be explanatory of the transmission of racial features. Studies suggest that children are spontaneous lineage essentialists about biological kinds and about human differences which they categorise into essentialist groups (Mallon 2013:82). If children are spontaneous lineage essentialists, this suggests that lineage essentialism is an innate cognitive developmental feature of humans.⁵

Mallon points out that although studies suggest that children have the tendency to make essentialist judgments about humans, it does not unquestionably show whether this result is the consequence of a cultural theory about racial differences rather than a cognitively innate theory about biological differences. If it were a culturally transmitted theory, there is a possibility that the HERE hypothesis is true and that children have merely picked up the prejudices of their parents from their interactions with them. If racial thinking is a merely cultural artefact, it is possible that it is a cultural artefact of the modern West.

The studies Mallon discussed throw doubt on the conceptual break hypothesis (which would exclude the possibility of the HERE hypothesis) even though they are not conclusive. To make a stronger case against the conceptual break hypothesis Mallon moves to ‘consider cross-cultural experimental evidence of lineage essentialism specifically about human kinds, focusing especially upon two apparently hard cases for the evolutionary cognitive theorist: Brazil and the Vezo of Madagascar’ (Mallon 2013:83). What looking at cross-cultural experimental evidence is meant to achieve is to investigate if some social phenomenon arises stably across different cultures. If it does, it may suggest that the root or underlying cause of the phenomenon may not be specific to a single

society or culture. This is what Mallon aims to show about racial thinking in his analysis of the case of racial thinking in Brazil.

2.2 Racial thinking HERE and there: the Latin American studies

Mallon recounts how some commentators have suggested that Brazilian ‘racial’ systems differ significantly from American racial systems in that the Brazilian systems are more fluid and do not make the same assumptions about lineage essentialism – the assumption that races represent somewhat exclusive ancestral lineages – as traditional American racial systems do. He explains that ‘the idea is that relevant social groups in Brazil are marked by appearance (ie by skin color, hair type, and so forth), but that this sort of identification is not tied to one’s parents’ group membership. Rather, appearance is a defeasible visible marker for important social categories (eg for economic status)’ with the effect that ‘Brazilian social categories group the same phenotypic range that is present in the United States in a way that makes little or no assumptions of lineage essentialism’ (Mallon 2013:83). The conclusion of the early studies by Harris and Kottack (1963) concluded that Brazilians have different classificatory systems unlike those of the US that are racially essentialist ideas underlain by ideas of biological inheritance.

On the face of it, this seems to support the HERE hypothesis which claims racial essentialism, ‘race thinking’ as such, originated in the modern West. If it were true that Brazilians do not have an essentialist system of racial categorisation, the finding would suggest that racial thinking may not be a human cognitive predisposition, leaving open the possibility of the HERE hypothesis being correct and, thus, for racial categorisation being a novel and ephemeral way of sorting people. Criticism of these studies – which found methodological errors in the survey instruments and the interpretation of the data – and new data from more recent studies, have lead researchers to a different conclusion about the case of racial thinking in Brazil. Mallon explains:

The Brazilian example has led evolutionary cognitive theorists to respond in two ways: first, they deny that lineage essentialism is in fact absent in Brazilian social categorization (Gil-White 2001b, Jones 2009). Second, they deny that an evolutionary psychological account of racial cognition predicts that Brazilian categories should operate in the same way as the United States. (Mallon 2013:84)

An issue reported of Harris and Kottack's (1963) study is that the survey design did not test for whether racially essentialist opinions of race were held by Brazilians and incompatible questions were asked on the matter of categorisation. When new, more discriminating studies were undertaken by Gil-White (2001) and Jones (2009), for example, the same pattern of belief formation – viz, lineage essentialism – was displayed although such lineage essentialism did not map neatly to the racial categories Brazilians actually use. Mallon cites the studies undertaken by Jones (2009) in which it was shown that 'subjects also held racial identity to be fixed under transformation of surface features (so for example, they held that one cannot change one's race via plastic surgery)' and that:

when asked the right questions, 'Brazilians... have an essentialist conception of race' on which it is 'an inherited, underlying property of individuals'. (Mallon 2013:84)

The explanation for this anomalous finding – that Brazilians do display lineage essentialist thinking about race but do not have lineage essentialist racial categories – is explained by an appeal to social and historical facts which have created differences in the contingent social situations between North America and Latin America. Mallon refers to Fredrickson (2002) who explains that although some groups in Latin America had been historically exploited, the purity-of-blood doctrine was never systematically applied to those with their ancestry:

Fredrickson's claim is, in effect, that the ubiquity of intergroup breeding undermined the capacity to sustain an essentialist classification regime, and so mixed-race categories were introduced and normalized (see, eg., Telles, 2002 for a similar view). This historical fact may be the central piece of what drives other apparent differences between North and Latin America. (Mallon 2013:84)

The differences in the racial classificatory systems between North America and Latin America can be explained by the fact that 'Brazil and the United States vary not only in their racial history, but also in the ways they culturally enforce racial boundaries' (Mallon 2013:85). The evidence thus points to a different fact: that racial classificatory systems can be sensitive to historical and social situations. Racial ideas are malleable.

The presence of racial thought seemingly outside of modern European-American design undermines the argument for the HERE hypothesis. It throws doubt on the plausibility of the conceptual break hypothesis because it suggests that people have a general cognitive predisposition to

essentialise biological types into exclusive kind categories and that this same tendency is intuitively applied in classifying people into racial kinds. What the Latin American studies are put forward to suggest, and the evolutionary psychological thesis is used to explain, is that we should expect essentialist thinking such as racial thinking to appear in similar forms across time and place – that it should be found in a variety of cultures, both contemporary and historical.

These findings are silent on the normative questions of racial thinking and its effects. Even if racial thinking is found to be an innate cognitive feature in humans, and racial thinking is deemed undesirable, interventions can still be made to mitigate the effects of this innate predisposition in humans in the same way we have made social interventions to prevent the manifestation of a range of other innate but socially undesirable predispositions (eg, the suppression of different kinds of violence or aggression – see Archer and Vaughan 2001 and Wilson et al 2003 for a discussion of candidate behaviours in the context of biological evolution).

Having reviewed this evidence, I turn my concern to what we are to do if racial thinking will not disappear. It has been admitted that racial terminology and practices – which include thinking in racial terms – always have inherent the risk of being used for prejudice and discrimination (Nash 1972:113), so what would be the rational thing for us to do if racial thinking will persist beyond even the use of racial terminology? If it is true that ‘racial constructs are always intricately tied up with power and discrimination’ (Erwin 2011:14) and that racial thinking could be with us indefinitely (Mallon 2013:86), what would be the correct approach to tackling the problems of racism in our society? How would we work towards creating and maintaining a more racially just society if the thought of race will follow us even when we intend to move past the idea of race? In the next section, I argue that we should retain or conserve the use of racial terminology for the purposes of monitoring and evaluating the problems of race, but over time actively revise and transform our ideas of race to be sensitive to our social goals in regards to racial justice and monitoring our progress towards it as even our ideas of racial identities shift. My argument is that since we cannot erase race it is better that we amend its social significance since even innate predispositions in humans can be suppressed or altered (Mallon 2013:86).

3. Tracking social injustices requires the social terminologies used to perpetrate them

We face a tremendous number of racial issues today. How do we identify and track them? Specialists in this area identify and track them through the use of racial terminology.⁶ The use of terminology is not merely an arbitrary lens through which contemporary South Africa is seen, it is a tool of focus that is used to track a particularly interesting group of (social) phenomena.

If we do away with the tracking of racial groups by doing away with racial terminology and classification, it would result in us not tracking any of these phenomena from a racial perspective. If such a view purports to validity it at least assumes that race may not be a relevant factor, that it is of little or no use, or that it cannot be used for administrative or social good (see Benatar 2008, 2010). There exists in the debate a variety of related views that are broadly eliminativist in policy. These views state that ‘the open-ended use of apartheid “race” categories as a way to achieve transformation is problematic and ultimately self-defeating’ (Ncayiyana 2012), that the use of apartheid racial terminology may be unconstitutional⁷, or that its use to establish affirmative action policies such as quotas is unethical (Hall and Woermann 2014). These views are not without their challengers (eg de Vos 2012). The question I pose is this: why would we want or not want to include an overtly racial critique of South African sociopolitical phenomena, and what purpose would terminologically eliminativist perspectives and analyses serve (or not serve)?

If it were possible that there was no more talk of race and racial thinking, South Africa would remain a perpetually racialised society in the distribution of wealth, goods, and services. The institutional structures that exist which have entrenched racist practices into material and lived conditions, such as our urban geography and the demographics of economic participation and material well-being, have great independence from how we choose to refer to each other – these issues are now systemic and not merely attitudinal (Krugell 2014, Pienaar and von Fintel 2014). This means that many of these problems of racial injustice would still exist albeit only without a name. Because the perpetuation of many of these injustices is systemic and not necessarily dependent on racist attitudes, these problems clearly cannot be solved by attitudinal shifts about race. What we would have done in the elimination of racial terminology is to have done away with the conceptual tools we use to talk about such issues,

but to have done nothing about those issues themselves. The persistence of race or its 'allure' has a multitude of sources. These are said to include:

our general theory of history, the ambiguities of dominant Enlightenment philosophy, current political economies, the distributive dimensions of the aesthetic regimes which surround us and their popular culture manifestations, and so on. These operate singly and/or in tandem to produce categories of description and social orders that are complex, contradictory and amenable to interpretations that are deeply discordant. (Soudien 2012:21-22)

Thinkers such as Soudien do argue that a precondition for the elimination of racial practices such as the use of racial terminology is the elimination of the material reality of racial differences. The elimination of the material reality of racial differences would go a long way to shattering the stereotypes about different races that are presently reinforced by the correlation of race and class or the correlation of race and lived experience in South Africa and abroad (Erwin 2012:94-96). This would go a long way to reverse the damage that racial ideas have had on the country, but this does not mean that this would rid the country of its racial ideas. The thought may be that, as a final step to racial justice and a fully non-racial society, racial eliminativism and the discontinuation of racial terminology would do this. But, as I have discussed, when looking at the evolutionary psychological evidence about how racial thinking comes about in society, there is reason to be pessimistic about the possibility of such an eliminativism.

When taking the pessimistic view about reaching the utopia of non-racialism seriously, there is good reason to want to retain racial terminology for the purposes of tracking the effects of racial thinking in the societies in which it is being utilised in one way or another. When looking at some of the strategies that people have used throughout history to create in-group/out-group categorisations for the purposes of prejudice and acts of discrimination or oppression, we find a consistent pattern of the kinds of justifications used for these practices particularly in regards to race (Nash 1972, Hacking 2005, Lape 2010, Heng 2011, Isaac 2013).

If race-based discrimination pre-dates, for instance, South African apartheid or colonial administrative machinery, it may be that the apartheid racial classifications are not the real problem even if the employment of racial ideas and the understanding of races in the apartheid context has been problematic and erroneous. The problem may be how ideas of race are leveraged and what racial categories come to mean in material terms

– inclusive of the psychological and interpersonal or social meanings that racial terminology comes to hold (see discussions in Biko 1987, Duncan et al 2001, Fanon 1963). Could it not be that we would have succeeded at reaching a sufficiently non-racial society when such categories, whether or not they are still in use, do not represent anything in terms of their material and psychological associations? Could it be that merely abandoning these terms now or later does no substantial or sustainable good? But how would we even answer any of these questions empirically without the conceptual tools we use to track race through its terminology?

For the purposes of measuring and evaluating our progress from racial injustice, racial categories are needed. Tracking the demographics of South Africa through the use of racial terminology allows for the comparison of present race relations to previous relations. These can be used in addition to other more general measures of well-being or economic change that may not necessarily be connected to race. If we have an interest in race, we need tools to track race. These tools are racial terminology. Having to engage in the use of the apartheid conceptual apparatus may be an unfortunate consequence of our historical heritage. It may be in the same sense, and for the same reasons, that we retain terminology about gender in trying to repair gender disparities in society (Haslanger 2000). It is by using the same tools for monitoring and evaluating change across races that we can be able to see if the balance of power has merely been relocated or if it is in a reasonably fair distribution across the groups of interest. This seems a good reason for why racial terminology should be retained even if eliminativism or non-racialism is a principle to which we may aspire.

Ideas of race do not remain static and change over time and with the social milieu (eg Smelser et al 2001, Isaac 2006, Lape 2010, de Vos 2012). This may make it useful for us to update our terminology in accordance to the changes race as a concept makes. Thus, given that racial issues persist past the current time but may also change over time, a revisionist view of race will need to be taken so long as racial issues remain relevant. From a pessimistic standpoint, if we wish to tackle the injustices of the past it may be the case that the use of the conceptual instruments of the past, in at least identifying injustices perpetrated in the past, is necessary – especially if we wish to evaluate the success or failures of the interventions we implement to address these issues.

This rationale is also underpinned by the practices of social scientists

dealing with the issues of inequality and justice on population levels.

In their chapter in the 2008 *Human Resources Development Review*, Woolard and Woolard explained that they ‘consider demographic issues, poverty and inequality, access to household services and access to social services (ie education, health and social security)’ in the context of apartheid racial classifications (Woolard and Woolard 2007:69). More particularly, they ‘consider how these indicators differ across space (the nine provinces and the urban/rural divide) and across race groups’ (2007:69). They explain that:

Apartheid and the racial identification which underpinned it explicitly linked race with differential access to resources and power. While some might argue that race is no longer a relevant marker, others such as the [former] Statistician-General, Pali Lehohla, argue that ‘if the post-apartheid order [is] committed to remedying this, race [must] be included in surveys and censuses, so that progress in eradicating the consequences of apartheid [can] be measured and monitored.’ Any analysis of household survey data shows that patterns in relation to employment, education, earnings, health, infrastructure and income all correlate strongly with race. Consequently, it remains relevant to discuss the South African population in terms of the four groups used in government documents, ie African, coloured, Indian/Asian and white. (Woolard and Woolard 2007:69-70)

What they are communicating is that race is an empirically relevant factor in social studies and that the removal of race from all analysis would be mistaken as particular phenomena of interest would no longer be captured by such an analysis. Although it is true that ‘social scientists cannot afford an uncritical agenda in their research on race’ (Erwin 2012:98) because race ‘is not *always* an important identity in South Africa’ (Erwin 2012:95), there is ample evidence that race is still a relevant and significant factor to take into account a lot of the time. There is good reason for eliminativism to be rejected on the grounds that social scientists require racial categories to do at least some of their work. Furthermore, as I have argued in this article, there is good reason to reject eliminativism on principle as a theoretically implausible position that can never achieve what it sets out to do because it is based on a mistake about the nature of racial thinking. Racial thinking precedes present (or even modern) racial classificatory systems and the issues they emerged with. This suggests that the elimination of current racial classificatory schemes and their practices would not eliminate racial thinking and so that the

potential for the prejudicial and discriminatory use of racial ideas will still be with us regardless. Eliminativism cannot be successful as a normative strategy, and eliminativism fails metaphysically to account for some of the things social scientists empirically study in the world. It is for these reasons that I have argued against the eliminativist view.

4. Closing remarks: short term retention, long term revision

Race as a social construct may stay with us longer than we would like. The collective wish for a non-racial society may be a utopian ideal, and one that may be exceedingly difficult to reach. In light of this, some pragmatic considerations may need to be taken in regards to how we hope to come as close to a non-racial society as we possibly can. I have suggested that so long as it is the case that racial concepts have social currency *and* correlate with lived experiences within the social world, racial terminology is a useful tool to track social facts associated with race. I suggest that it is only through transformation in society that the language of race *can* become redundant and uninteresting, and that the abandonment of racial terminology by decree will do little to bring about a truly non-racial society.

I have presented an argument that undermines ‘gradualist’ approaches to racial eliminativism – the claim that race can eventually be overcome and discarded at some unspecified time in the future. What I have argued is that the most we can do about racial thinking and the classificatory behaviours that accompany them is mediate their effects and minimise their significance in human relations (whether or not we still use racial terminology). I contend that gradualism can only be used as a type of mediation but cannot logically terminate in an elimination of race or bring about a non-racial utopia because racial thinking may be a cognitive predisposition in humans.

I have made the counterintuitive suggestion that the best way to strive for a fairer, more just, non-racial society is through the continued use of racial terminology until such a time that racial terminology makes itself redundant through its own inability to describe aspects of social reality. Our terminology about race should track changes to the use of the concept and its relation to our social world. This is a short term retentionist but long term revisionist position on the question of racial terminology and its uses.

Notes

1. In fact, the type of racial theories people hold and the kinds of racial terminologies they use have been demonstrated to have differing effects on the entrenchment of social attitudes such as discrimination or prejudice, and even affect outcomes such as the likeliness of participation or support for social justice initiatives. See Donovan (2016a) and Williams and Eberhardt (2008) for discussions and empirical reports supporting this point. No such support is available for the effects of eliminativism. The cases discussed in section 2 suggest the contrary: namely, that terminological elimination is not necessarily helpful given that humans have implicit or folk theories about diversity and difference that are best characterised as ‘racial thought’ (see Mallon 2013).
2. It may be critical to note here that this is not arguing that racism or discrimination is in any way inherent in humans – it is merely to say that classification on the basis of superficial characteristics may be a behavioural predisposition in humans. This also does not imply that any of our contingent classifications are necessary or inherently predisposed to human thinking, it is that the practice of classification that can result in racial practices may be predisposed.
3. The exact beginning of the ‘modern’ period is not crucial to the argument. What is crucial is the claim of the singular historical emergence of racial thinking being put forward by the conceptual break and HERE hypotheses.
4. These ideas are not without their detractors. Hacking (2005) suggests that the long history of race may be intricately linked to the history of empire and subjugation between peoples (Hacking 2005:111-113). His case for imperialism being the reason or impetus for human classification and stereotyping in racial terms stretches to at least as far back as Xerxes (*circa* 519-465 BCE), which itself undermines the HERE hypothesis which claims that race is a modern invention. Even if it turns out that racial classification is an ostensibly cultural invention, it is much older than its modern incarnations even in the civilisations of the West. See Eliav-Feldon et al (2009) and Lape (2010).
5. This argument may not be convincing as there is no way to tell what exactly is innate in such situations. This form of argument that might be characterised as an ‘informal plausibility argument’ (see Sterelny 2003:188 for this use of terminology). See Sterelny (2003:191-5) for a discussion on the evolutionary basis of folk biological concepts and general doubts about these concepts reflecting *innate* cognitive modules. Nevertheless, the cross-cultural stability of racial classification as described does suggest that *some* evolutionarily stable mechanism is responsible for the affordance of racial thinking in humans.
6. Government agencies such as STATS SA and civil organisations such as the SAIRR use racial terminology as the relevant indices for tracking race-related social change. This begs the question of whether they are correct to do so.

7. This has been disputed. See summary of correspondence between People Against Racial Classification (PARC) and the South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC), collated by the PARC on their website. Access this summary here: [http://parcsa.co.za/documents/PARC-Correspondence betweenPARCandHRC.doc](http://parcsa.co.za/documents/PARC-Correspondence%20betweenPARCandHRC.doc).

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