Connecting Skin Colour Consciousness with Racism

by

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Connecting Narratives of Skin Colour Consciousness with Racism

Introduction

Over here [in Western Australia], there are a lot of Anglo-Indians that are fair-skinned, and they still look down on us [dark-skinned Anglo-Indians] … Anglo-Indians who are fair-skinned with blue eyes still look down on us and it is that little status thing. Colour, it is a colour thing (Stewart).

I used to get picked on because of the colour of my skin … when I was going through school, even though it was a very multicultural school, there was still – you could still get picked on. There were no two ways about it (Fiona).

They referred to me as an Indian, but to this day, I say I am an Anglo-Indian … Australia was very racist … my mother told me not to play in the sun when I was at school and not to get too burnt because of the interview [by Australian immigration officials prior to his emigration from India] (Daryl).

In this paper, I draw on data from my doctoral research into Anglo-Indian migration and settlement in Western Australia from the time of India’s independence from Britain in 1947. My research draws on earlier and more recent historical and anthropological studies of Anglo-Indians, but it also draws heavily on the ‘language’ of my informants: on their spoken life histories and recollections, as well as significant data generated through my participant observation, both during formal activities that I attended at the Australian Anglo-Indian Association in the Perth suburb of Padbury. However, it is mostly through more formally recorded interviews that informants, like Stewart, Fiona, and Daryl, articulate their perceptions of the skin colour differences among Anglo-Indians, and describe their experiences of racism, both before and after migration.

While undertaking fieldwork for this doctoral research, my own light skin colour was often questioned by informants, who expressed curiosity about the skin colour of my parents
and children. My Anglo-Indianness was clearly being measured, and my ‘insider’ status challenged. From interviews with 40 informants in Western Australia, some first- and second-generation narratives reflected the type of skin colour consciousness that Anglo-Indian academics, Carolyn and Glen D’Cruz (2007: 114) described as they recalled the ways in which their own appearances – their dark skin colour – reflected the Indian, rather than Anglo, influences in their ancestry:

Although our efforts to keep out of the sun could prevent us from getting darker, there was no magic solution to make us white. This didn’t stop us trying, though. For Glen, it seemed logical to a young schoolboy that he could make himself whiter by staying in the bath longer, while Carolyn as a teenager optimistically tried powder and foundation to lighten her skin in the hope of making herself more attractive (D’Cruz and D’Cruz 2007: 114).

Anglo-Indian attitudes towards differences in skin colour, and the ways in which they perceive their own, as well as others’ skin colour, receive little critical analysis in much of the literature on Anglo-Indians, even in some of the more recent works by such scholars as Lionel Caplan (2001) and Alison Blunt (2005). However, Erica Lewin (2005), a researcher who is herself an Anglo-Indian, discusses perceptions about skin colour and heritage among Anglo-Indian women in Western Australia. Lewin notes that many participants in her research associate lighter skin colour with a higher social standing in both India and Western Australia, and are conscious of the darker skin colour among the Indian population, from whom they distance themselves (2005: 647). Similarly, my data indicate that even years after their migration and settlement in Western Australia, some Anglo-Indians continue to equate class status, and in some cases, ‘race’, with skin colour, as they did in India. In Western Australia, informants experience discrimination towards their skin colour, which impacts on their self-esteem and sense of belonging.
Discrimination among Anglo-Indians

However, it is significant that some of these informants expressed prejudices towards other Anglo-Indians of darker skin colour, whom they suspected of being Indian Christians, and of wrongly identifying as Anglo-Indians. For instance, first-generation informants, Reginald and George, described Indian Christians as Indians who have converted from Hinduism to Christianity, but who did not have British ancestry. Similar definitions of, and prejudices towards, Indian Christians were expressed during a formal meeting of the Australian Anglo-Indian Association that I attended in 2007, when an office-bearer explained the importance of distinguishing between ‘authentic’ Anglo-Indians and Indian Christians before releasing charitable funds raised for disadvantaged Anglo-Indians who remained in India.

Historically, Anglo-Indian resentment towards Indian Christians, who attempted to infiltrate the Anglo-Indian community in India, revolved around the perceptions that Indian Christians belonged to a lower class, and were not as well-educated as Anglo-Indians (Anthony 1969: 378-9; Beaglehole 1967: 60-3). Social anthropologist, V. R. Gaikwad (1967: 39-40) described the ways in which Anglo-Indians attributed ‘many of the social ills of the community’ to the lower-class of Indian Christians and Portuguese Indians, who identified as Anglo-Indians in order to improve their social status. Certainly, and as the literature suggests, prejudices and perceptions of difference based on skin colour were upmost in the minds of many Anglo-Indians in colonial and postcolonial India (Anthony 1969: 7, 9; Maher 1962: 73, 104-5; Schermerhorn 1978: 220, 224). Informants in this research have demonstrated the endurance of such prejudices, and the potential for their transmission to subsequent generations of Anglo-Indians.
Discrimination towards Anglo-Indians

In the Australian context, Anglo-Indians experienced (and continue to experience) the legacies of the White Australia Policy and its attempts to limit immigration to those of Anglo-Saxon-Celtic appearance. Many first-generation informants left independent India because they perceived themselves to be culturally and socially different from the Indian population, as one informant, Geoffrey, explained:

We never saw ourselves as Indian. If we couldn’t see ourselves in the mirror, we would think we were Europeans. That is the way we think: we are Christians, we speak English, our culture is more aligned to Western values.

For Anglo-Indians in this research, discrimination in Australia was quite unexpected because they believed that they were culturally similar to Anglo-Australians, as explained by another informant, Graham, who described his feelings of not belonging in independent India, and his efforts to help his India-born children overcome racism at school in Western Australia:

We left India because things were difficult for us as Anglo-Indians. We spoke English, we lived the English way, our habits, our dress, our manners, everything was English.

Because both my sons are dark like I am, they were called names like ‘liquorice’ … we explained to them the fact that we are living in a country where there is a predominantly white population and we have made them understand that they should not take that personally.

Australia’s changing immigration policies, from assimilationism to multiculturalism, does little to protect Anglo-Indians from prejudice towards their dark skin colour. However, skin colour-consciousness is not exclusive to Anglo-Indians, nor is racist behaviour exclusive to members of Australian society. I have considered it necessary, therefore, to provide a
background to articulations of ‘race’, and to explain my understanding of what constitutes racism.

**Conceptualising ‘race’ and racism**

In his paper, ‘The Semantics of Race’, David Goldberg (1992: 543-4) draws attention to the historical connections between racism and the concept of ‘race’, and the difficulties associated with determining which came first, ‘the concept or the disposition to distance and exclude’. Rather than attempt to define ‘race’, he believes it is more useful to examine how ‘race’ is understood and articulated in the process of individual and group identification: of how people perceive differences or similarities between self and other. However, Goldberg points out that this approach is generally unacceptable in the social sciences, which attempt to make sense of ‘socially significant terms’ by stipulating what they *ought* to mean. A better approach would be to consider the history of how these terms have been used, and what effects they have had on society. I support the view of Goldberg (1992: 558-9), that ‘race’ is not a fixed concept, but is fluid, and has the capacity to define and re-define groups of people in various locations, and at various times. The fixing of historically specific meaning for ‘race’ depends on the social conditions and the ‘socio-logic of racialized knowledge’ at any given time.

Paul Gilroy (2000: 12) is adamant that ‘race’ should no longer be condoned as a means of communal or personal identification. In his opinion, when racialised groups resist oppression and the brutality of colonialism by ‘absorbing and deflecting abuse’, they transform the legacies of colonialism into something from which they derive a sense of solidarity and pride. The danger in such a transformation of oppression into a source of joy and pride in one’s racial identity lies in its perpetuation of the idea of different ‘races’, and its reinforcement of racial hierarchies (Gilroy 2000: 13). However, Goldberg (1992: 564) argues
that the concept of ‘race’ has been, and still is, significant to the ways in which people self-
identify: ‘they will take themselves racially to be what they “naturally” are.’ His approach to
explaining the historical and social significance of the concept of ‘race’ legitimises the study
of racism, and the ways in which informants in this research articulate their understandings of
‘race’ (and in some cases, ‘mixed race’) in their identity constructions.

According to Miles and Brown (2003: 7-9, 41), the epistemological and ontological
questions as to whether the concept of ‘race’ accurately represents human beings, and their
social relationships, must be answered in the negative: ‘races’ do not exist, but are reflective
of 18th- and 19th-century notions of differences between humans that are based on skin colour,
hair type, nose shape, facial angle, and cranial capacity. The authors (2003: 10-11) suggest
that, while there are dangers in any attempt to understand racism, it may be more problematic
to ignore its existence, and point out the inaccuracy of presuming that only ‘white’ people are
capable of racist behaviour. While my research recognises discrimination based on skin
colour among and towards Anglo-Indians as racism, and reveals the ways in which informants
describe Anglo-Indians as members of a particular ‘race’, it firmly rejects the existence of
‘race’.

Nonetheless, there must be some consideration for the ways in which informants self
identify. Their references to Anglo-Indians as members of a particular ‘race’, or as a people of
‘mixed race’, reflect the folk concept of ‘race’, which is also used by some postcolonial
writers in their discussions of the relationships between European colonisers and colonised
subjects. However, informants construct the folk concept of ‘race’ as a way of differentiating
between themselves as Anglo-Indians of mixed British and Indian backgrounds, and the
Indian population. In the Australian context, informants differentiate between themselves, as Anglo-Indians, and others, as members of different ‘racial’ groups.

**Forms of racism in the Australian context**

In their discussion of anti-Asian sentiments within Australian society, Laksiri Jayasuriya and Kee Pookong (1999: 81) refer to ‘old racism’: notions of racial inferiority or superiority based on physical characteristics, including skin colour. The authors point out that ‘old racism’ is being replaced by a new form of racism that values cultural sameness rather than diversity, and demands national unity. This new form of racism reflects a desire for the re-introduction of earlier Australian immigration policies of assimilation and integration that were designed to create a homogenous Australian society. However, in terms of discrimination against Anglo-Indians in Western Australia, informants recall more prejudice towards their skin colour than to their maintenance of a different culture. As English-speaking Australian citizens, who are predominantly Christian, and who live Western lifestyles, Anglo-Indian informants experience an older form of racism, which amounts to discrimination based on appearance. This form of racism appears to be unrelated to a newer form of racism that is ‘preoccupied with cultural homogeneity, unity, social cohesion and social harmony’ (Jayasuriya and Pookong 1999: 83).

Similarly, Carole Tan (2006: 68) associates the *appearance* of ‘Chineseness’ (as opposed to ‘Australianness’) with exclusionism in Australian society, as she draws from interviews with multi-generational Chinese Australians. In particular, Tan (2006: 69) presents the narrative of a third-generation informant who encountered racist behaviour towards her appearance:
‘I can remember walking across a street in Sydney, Elizabeth Street – and I was almost at a crossing and the light had changed so I was just stuck there. So there were people crossing the road and these boys just said something like, you know, “Asians out!” and were shouting at me. It’s really tragic. This was extremely hurtful and I also felt it was dangerous. You know, had this been in the evening or at night these people would have been quite capable of attacking a person they don’t know … ’

While Tan’s research only involves subsequent generations of Chinese migrants, her discussion of the ‘tyranny of appearance’ within Australian society is most relevant to my focus on skin colour-consciousness, and resonates with the experiences of first- and second-generation Anglo-Indian informants, whose appearances are perceived as different and inferior to Anglo-Australians. However, Tan’s observations also reveal that Chinese Australians are discriminated against because their perceived cultural differences pose a threat to social cohesion, and she notes:

These ambivalent and contradictory stereotypes constituting “Asians” in Australia as both poor and dependent and incredibly rich and “successful” ultimately have similar outcomes – in both instances they constitute Asians as “undesirable” and a threat to the social and economic well-being of white Australians (Tan 2006: 74).

Contemporary attitudes towards Chinese Australians have demonstrated the resilience of earlier prejudices, which were manifested in the attitudes of British settlers towards both Indigenous Australians, and the influx of Chinese immigrants during the 19th century (Curthoys 1999: 278). According to Burnley (2001: 29), the early period of British settlement saw the displacement of Indigenous Australians from their traditional lands by British immigrant pastoralists. The gold-rushes of the mid-19th century saw the immigration to Australia of labourers from China before the 1877 restrictions were placed on their access to Queensland goldfields, and the on-set of anti-Chinese agitation in New South Wales. By
1888, restrictions were officially placed on Chinese immigration to Australia (Jayasuriya et al 2003: 201-2).

According to Ann Curthoys (1999: 287-9), Indigenous Australians and Asian immigrants have been, and continue to be, affected by the processes of colonisation and decolonisation, despite the ideology of Australian multiculturalism:

> We share the situation of living on someone else’s land. The incompleteness of decolonisation means that while indigenous people and Asian immigrants share a common experience of racial hostility and being defined outside the nation, they at the same time occupy significantly different places on the colonial/postcolonial spectrum.

Discriminatory attitudes towards Indigenous Australians are more complex than racism based on skin colour, whereas, the type of racism that Anglo-Indian informants experience is largely directed at their darker skin colour rather than their culture or lifestyles. Indigenous Australians are victims of racism not only towards their dark skin colour, but also, their perceived lower-class status that originated with the migration of early British settlers who considered the Australian colony to be *terra nullus* (vacant land) and identified Indigenous Australians as ‘non-persons’ (Miles and Brown 2003: 137).

As Curthoys (1999: 282) explained, during the first half of the 20th century, Indigenous Australians were confined to reserves and fringe settlements, and were dispossessed of their land. They were encouraged to assimilate into Anglo-Australian society through the forced removal of children from their families so that their education in ‘white’ institutions and foster homes reinforced Anglo-Australian values. However, during the 1960s, there was growing concern for human rights, racial equality, and non-discrimination within Australian society, which was supported internationally. Discriminatory legislation was
removed and Indigenous Australians were granted Federal voting rights in 1961. They were also given the right to purchase and consume alcohol.

A history of racist policy-making continues to haunt Australia and is manifested in the struggles for self-determination among Indigenous Australian communities. Similarly, racist notions of superiority/inferiority based on skin colour – which also emanated from British colonisation, and impacted on Anglo-Indian identity and sense of belonging before their emigration – continue to affect identity constructions and sense of belonging among Anglo-Indian informants, today. Carolyn and Glenn D’Cruz (2007: 119) recall that while their own appearance – their dark skin colour – gives them some creditability in their academic, ‘postcolonial’ work environments, they still see it as an indication that they are not completely Western. They recall the bigotry that other members of their families experienced on their arrival in Australia during the early years of multiculturalism. Contrary to my findings, they suggest that subsequent generations of Anglo-Indians may ‘enjoy a more broad-minded multicultural society’ and not be affected by prejudice towards their dark complexions (2007: 114). They explain how prejudice (based on skin colour) towards Anglo-Indians lessened as it was re-directed at Indigenous Australians and European immigrants (2007: 119). In my view it is doubtful that prejudice has ever been directed away from Indigenous Australians.

It is significant that when writing his life narrative (in Perkins 2007: 139), D’Cruz describes the difficulties he encountered when developing friendships as a teenager in Western Australia during the 1970s and 1980s:

The whole business of dating girls filled me with dread and trepidation, as it probably does most adolescents. However, the anxiety that accompanies the rituals of teenage
dating is more intense when you have dark skin. I rarely approached girls I found attractive, not so much because I feared rejection in itself but because I feared rejection on the grounds of my race. The fact that I continued to receive racial taunts didn’t help. For me, high school in Australia was hell, even though I largely escaped physical violence.

The degree of ambivalence towards acknowledging experiences of discrimination that I detect in Glenn D’Cruz’s writing are more apparent in the narratives of some informants, who provide lengthy descriptions of the types of racist behaviours towards their dark skin colour that they have endured, but either excuse the behaviour as jocular and meaningless, or flatly deny that they had felt discriminated against.

Similarly, Janis Wilton (1994: 87) notes that many Chinese-Australians accept that racism is an aspect of their parents’ settlement experiences in Australia. Subsequent generations of Chinese immigrants prefer to focus on their achievements and acceptance into Australian society, as well as their Chinese traditions (1994: 89). The reluctance of some immigrants to acknowledge the extent of their experiences of racism is, perhaps, better understood as their resistance to the discourse of ‘race’, in that they refuse to perceive themselves as marginalised or disconnected from others (Root 2002: 358). Nonetheless, the number of Anglo-Indians residing in Australia reflects their marginal status, as they constitute just 0.0018 per cent of the total population (D’Cruz and D’Cruz 2007: 113).

Significantly, D’Cruz and D’Cruz (2007: 115), who are acutely aware of skin colour-consciousness among Anglo-Indians, refer to the continued marketing of a skin-whitening product that is sold worldwide. They claim that the skin-whitening industry is worth US$140 million per year in India, but point out that the desire for ‘whiteness’ is not restricted to Indians and Anglo-Indians. In his paper ‘Who’s the Fairest of Them All? Television ads for
skin-whitening cosmetics in Hong Kong’, Solomon Leong (2006) discusses the significance of skin colour to racial identity in Hong Kong, where a lighter complexion is associated with admiration. His research among university-educated male and female local Chinese participants, who are aged between the early 20s to mid-40s, reveals that the fair complexions of Japanese and Northern Chinese women are associated with a higher class and social status. The darker complexions of other Asian women (such as Filipinas and Indonesians) are associated with a lower social status, due to their perceived coarseness and inelegance (2006: 172).

Conclusions

The use of skin-whitening products is testimony to the extent of the problems associated with skin colour-consciousness in once-colonised societies. Connections between skin colour-consciousness and racism form an integral part of my research, which endeavours to demonstrate how the colonial histories of informants are closely tied to their sense of self, and their ways of recognising others.

As members of a marginal group, the product of British and European colonisation in India, informants express their skin colour-consciousness in ways that reflect internalisation of racist colonial values and beliefs, and many associate a higher status with lighter skin colour in much the same way as the individuals researched in Hong Kong. My data indicate that older forms of racism, whereby people are discriminated against because of their physical characteristics (such as skin colour, facial features, and hair texture), co-exist with newer forms of racism whereby different cultural practices and lifestyles are perceived to threaten social cohesion and national unity. Such newer forms of racism reflect a desire within
Australian society for a return to earlier policies of assimilation and integration that were replaced with multiculturalism.

When compared with the types of racism that Indigenous Australians endure, Anglo-Indian informants mostly describe their experiences of discrimination towards their skin colour rather than to their culture, lifestyles, and perceived class status. It is significant that some of these informants also discriminate against other darker-skinned Anglo-Indians, which further reflects the influences of their histories of colonisation in India, where attitudes towards Indian Christians and their place in society originated.

Notes:

1 Of 40 informants, 22 are currently members of the Australian Anglo-Indian Association in Western Australia, of which I am also a lifetime member. The rest, who were recruited through my contacts within the Association and my own network of Anglo-Indian immigrants in Western Australia (people to whom I have been referred by my relatives and friends), are not members of the Australian Anglo-Indian Association.

2 I describe myself as an ‘insider’ researcher because I was born in London to Anglo-Indian immigrant parents, and grew up in Western Australia. Many members of my large extended family in Western Australia were born and educated in India, both before and after Independence in 1947.

References


