‘Knowing me, Knowing you’: biographies and subjectivities in the study of ‘race’

Kevin Hylton and Jonathan Long

Introduction

Dealing with a normative concept like social justice it is easy to presume that our own norms prevail. However, it is clear that though there is often consensus that social justice should be a fundamental principle it is vital that we critique what these principles mean for individuals and key stakeholders in society. Importantly, our critical gaze should not exclude turning on our own subject positions. When critical research seeks to promote social justice we must address questions of what social justice looks like in the arena of sport and leisure. In part this is contingent on people’s own social position so, in the context of repeated demands for reflexive research, we consider the implications of our selves, two academics, one Black[1] one White[2] with diverging and converging backgrounds, researching vexed issues of ‘race’ in sport and leisure. We do this by returning to an exercise conducted some time ago with two of our co-researchers[3] that has led to related publications on the place of ‘race’ in research (Hylton and Long, 2015) and by interrogating our biographies in the context of our sensitivity to the use of problematic political approaches, labels, ideas and experiences surrounding ‘race’ and ethnicity (Long and Hylton, 2014). Having enjoyed the advantage of working in multi-ethnic teams where others have challenged the assumptions we did not even know we were making, we now address some of the key themes we believe are central to our understanding of racialised processes in research, theory and practice. To demonstrate their significance for a continued critical approach to social justice we draw on these reflective narratives to identify links to issues emerging from our empirical research.

One of the points made by Arai and Kivel (2009) in their reflections on social justice and researching ‘race’ is that the categorical nature of ‘race’ and ethnicity often leaves research participants, and subsequently whole categories, open to stereotyping. The failure to problematise those categories makes research vulnerable to essentialising forces that perpetuate oppression. However, it is in that paradoxical space of engaging with the lived realities of those socially constructed identifiers of ‘race’, ethnicity and nationality that we have been able to work with and against racial categories (Hylton, 2015a; Long et al., 2014; Long et al., 2009; Hylton and Long, 2015), what Gunaratnam would describe as a ‘treacherous bind’ (Gunaratnam, 2003). It is our contention in this paper that examining our own biographies makes us more aware of the forces at play and therefore helps us to challenge such essentialising categories which we would argue significantly improves approaches to social justice.

In the following section the italicised text represents extracts from our original narrative accounts, while in ordinary text we offer some reflections that are informed by the original comments offered by the others in the project team.

Our stories: responses and reactions

Kevin's story and reflection

(Song). "The world is black, the world is white, together we learn to read and write, to read and write". It's primary school in Leeds, assembly, and my class is singing its heart out. Whilst I am singing I am wondering if 'they' are thinking the same thing as 'us' (well, by 'us', I mean me and Brian James, the only other Black person in the class). I hated this song because it was one of those times that made me shift from being Kevin to being 'Black', different. For a seven year old this is very disconcerting and could be viewed as one of the 'awakenings' that young Black people face as their superficial dissimilitude is emphasised by primary school songs, by school plays (my brother played the 'Black Knight' in a primary school play, and we also watched 'Please Sir', 'Love Thy Neighbour' and 'Rising Damp' that provided me with images of myself, or at least people in my image, that remained unproblematised by my family and me for many years because they were … ahem, funny?

My parents came from Jamaica in the 1950s and we travelled 'up north' to Leeds in the '60s for new jobs (Yorkshire Television and Nursing). My parents never spoke of 'race', or racism. It was not a rule, it just was not an issue discussed in the house. Occasionally, however, I would be reminded of my Blackness and, as mentioned earlier, it could be funny on television, or it could be very different in the centre of Leeds while avoiding threats of National Front racist violence in the 1970s.

Reading my reflective biography my colleagues expressed views that my sense of self and ethnicity were marked at a *very* early age; partly through my African-Caribbean heritage and working class northernness coupled with a reading of my 'otherness'. The irony of the symbolic multiculturalism in the song that made me so uncomfortable, and the power of the media to shape images of Blackness, reflect the environmental tensions experienced by young Black people like me in the '60s and '70s. I wrote later in my account of my critical sociological awareness emerging at university, part of a process of 'becoming' Black. On reflection, this 'becoming' occurred *very* early, but it was through developing more of a critical race consciousness that I became comfortable in articulating, defending and championing issues of 'race' and Blackness which my earlier experiences of education stymied through ignorance or utopian colourblindness.

It was clear to one of my co-authors that my account was almost the polar opposite of Jonathan's in relation to how visible Blackness was, how it was signified through song, play and the media. It was also apparent that my primary identity was my Blackness rather than class or nationality, which seemed to take a more prominent place in Jonathan's reflective recount (below).

The notion of colourblindness and meritocracy followed me into the world of work as I progressed into local authority sport development. Local authority sport often mimicked my experience(s) of education; for example, how Black people were absent from influential positions. As I wrote about my continuing feelings of exclusion and alienation in education and in local government my co-authors reflected on the way racism shifted from my parents' experiences of overt explicit manifestations to more coded and subtle systemic forms in public and institutional

discourses; that is, the racisms are still there but have become more slippery, ambiguous and pernicious. Their observations also helped me to a better understanding of my father's claims that racism has dissipated since he arrived in the '50s to witness 'no blacks' signs in public places and guest houses. Indeed, as they packed to go back to Jamaica, my father recounted how we could never have lived in the area they were leaving when they first arrived in Leeds due to racism and our class position; hence his assessment that racism was much less of an issue for him now.

I embrace my raced identity as it is part of my development as a productive social being. However, I despise my experiences of racism because it necessarily requires an additional level of reflexivity in light of the potential of everyday racialised microaggressions. It forces me to recognise the continued legacy of Du Bois' recognition of and how Black and minoritised ethnic[4] people develop a heightened awareness of themselves in White dominated societies. However skilfully I might manage everyday racism, control can be surrendered at any moment. The perpetual awareness of the racialised self is a necessary but tiring aspect of Blackness. As Du Bois argued, 'being a problem is a strange experience' (Du Bois, 1994: p.1).

The experiences that have led me to where I am today point to the ontological root of my research, that retains an orbit around 'race' and challenging racism as means of pursuing social justice. I continue to privilege the Black experience, disrupting myopic dominant epistemologies and ideologies because it is akin to a lifeline to a 'young me' as I think about what would benefit young scholars personally, educationally and professionally. In evolving a critical 'race' approach for current and new generations I also have in mind the need to disseminate information to practitioners and policymakers for their own professional development. In doing that I am as critical of positions taken by allies, that might include colourblindness (Bonilla-Silva 2010) or what Sullivan and Tuana (2007) describe as epistemologies of ignorance, as of more obvious adversaries.

My approach to research has become one of advocacy and change which leads to work on diversity, equity and inclusion that emphasises the notion of social transformation underpinned by Critical Race Theory (CRT). Moving from the neutral or solely critical, the political imperative of CRT requires an assessment of 'so what?' in research; a factor not always evident in sport and leisure theorising. However, my first engagement with the politics of 'race', and in particular the heterogeneity of the Black experience, came through my earlier Masters research that explored the experiences of senior Black leisure managers across local authorities. My methodology demonstrated a recognition of 'insiderness' and the strengths of co-culturalness with my sample, yet what my life and educational experience did not prepare me for was a Black manager who rejected any ideas of racial processes affecting her progression, policies or practices. My Masters dissertation observed:

> Discrimination was not a problem for all of the respondents. Jasbir was quite confident that she had never experienced racism of any sort. Compounded by the fact that Jasbir is of Asian origin this was recognised as very surprising and quite an achievement in nineties Britain. The same respondent went on to argue that the problem of racism and discrimination was accentuated by

> academics who sensationalise it: "If the problem was not given as much space then it would cease to be a problem".

Internalised racism and uncritical apolitical viewpoints accompanying institutional hegemony can lead to unexpected claims, but these are lived realities and have their own validity. Research findings would be neater if responses far from the line of best fit were ignored, but reductionist, partial, apolitical, pseudo-objective accounts are unhelpful regardless of the rationale for a study. The important thing for me to recognise as a researcher is that the Black experience is diverse and multifaceted and the background of the researcher cannot justify uncritical or spurious approaches. It is at times like these that reflexivity and the notion of constructed identities and critical 'race' scholarship must coalesce. Any approach to researching 'race' without this critical approach is in itself flawed.

Jonathan's story and reflection

Born in Calcutta where my father worked for 10 years after 'Independence'. Parents were members of the social and sports clubs, but I had little awareness of the social significance of these until much later. We left when I was four so have few clear memories. However, it left some trace because for as long as I can remember any political consciousness, and predating any theoretical analysis, I've been uncomfortable with the colonial legacy... We returned to a very White Norwich. I doubt I saw a Black person in the city the whole time I lived there (much later Norwich City were one of only two clubs initially to refuse to sign the Let's Kick Racism Out of Football Charter – I wrote to the Chairman to protest and was told there wasn't a problem in Norwich because they had no minority ethnic groups living there).

While aware of difference, my appreciation of Whiteness was slow to develop. At first this is hardly surprising. Even when we moved to Huddersfield [aged 13 in 1966] *where there were Black people from African-Caribbean communities, they played little part in my life. There was both spatial segregation, we lived on the edge of town, and educational segregation, I went to a boys (state) grammar school. I have no clear recollection of there being African-Caribbeans in the school, and can only remember there being three Asians. Moreover, although we played ordinary rugby rather than 'rugger' I have no memory of playing against school teams with Black players either. My awareness of Whiteness only arose while travelling abroad, which is something easily left behind in the quotidian of daily life in the UK.*

In comparison with Kevin's account, this reflection points to the asymmetry in racialisation that one of the group referred to between Black awareness of Blackness and White awareness of; few people in African Caribbean or Asian communities can be so forgetful. Co-researchers observed that my appreciation of difference was an intermingling of class and nation rather than of matters purely of 'race':

You cannot live in Scotland without being aware of a certain antipathy to the English collectively. As an individual though, I was virtually never aware of anything untoward being directed at me. Yet when someone from a minoritised ethnic group suggests to me that they've never experienced racism, I'm openly disbelieving.

I face a dilemma; like Kevin I am surprised by research participants like Jasbir or sport stars who deny that they have ever been treated in a racist manner, yet here was I constructing something akin to that. Rather tongue in cheek one of the others asked whether racist behaviour is just in our imaginations and this is 'why sceptics argue that racism would go away if people like [us] stopped writing about it'? In retrospect there were incidents that may well have been attributable to prejudice against the English. Either I chose to overlook it at the time or attributed some other cause; after all they could have simply not liked me. We often do not know what individual actions may be being taken against our interests, and if we are aware it may be difficult to attribute cause. There is, though, plenty of research evidence to suggest that racism does exist in society in general and in sport in particular.

In my narrative I recounted two incidents separated by some 15 years when my response to racist outbursts was very different. The first involved the casual use of racist language by classmates to put a younger pupil down; I felt ashamed, but did nothing. While that was a stand-out incident for me it was probably quite routine for the Asian youngster. The second was at a Scotland versus England football international at Hampden Park. England had three Black players in that match (Barnes, Blissett and Chamberlain), and part way through someone sitting behind me started some racist chanting. I turned around and not very eloquently told him to shut up – not the smartest thing to do with such an obviously English accent, but the Scottish fan was so clearly taken aback that someone was willing to challenge his behaviour, there was no bother and no more chanting.

Colleagues offered reasoned accounts to explain my different reactions, but I was aware of no conscious calculation; the second response was pure anger. Surviving that foolhardiness, however, gave me the confidence to challenge later incidents. It is also indicative of changing times: a pithy response at Hampden was sufficient because discussions of racism in football meant the perpetrator recognised immediately the nature of my reproach, whereas at school, perhaps 15 years earlier, a lengthy explanation would have been required. The significance of changing times was also evident to me in the interpretations offered by my younger colleagues, whose formative years had been rather later when not only had demographics altered, but debates around racial inequalities had been rehearsed more often. This demonstrated to me how hazardous it can be in applying discourses and understandings developed in one era in analysing another. Contexts can change fast and need to be examined carefully. The observation by Kevin's father about experiencing less racism now than when he moved to the UK may mean no more than there are fewer incidents of overt racism today than in the '60s/'70s, but there are now more recognised forms of racism and alternative targets of racists.

Some of the group seemed quite clear about moments of racial awakening, but I have no such awareness of a particular moment; for me it was an evolutionary process with no obvious beginning. To attribute it to being born in India would, I believe, be tantamount to false memory syndrome as it is hard to recall life at such a young age. I remember initially taking offence at the Black Power salute by Smith and Carlos at the 200m medal ceremony of the Mexico Olympics. As a White middle class lad in Huddersfield how could I think otherwise in the face of the chorus of disapproval? I lacked the necessary tools, and in the media there was no counter

narrative. Nonetheless, over the next few years I must have found alternative sources because I gradually worked out that their action was both brave and entirely justified. Sadly, for the sake of our narrative project, there had been no Damascene moment, nor devastating critical insight; life is more messy and confused than that.

By whatever route I now recognise a privileged position, though this only happens on reflection rather than in the everyday. For example, I wrote at the time:

> *As a member of staff in a university my privileged position allows me to promote anti-racist messages even though I know that Combat 18[5] have threatened some staff doing the same. During the course of our research into racism in sport I have felt that it is easier for me to expose elements of racism than it is for Black researchers in the same field. My critiques cannot so readily be dismissed as special pleading (a Black researcher might be accused of having a chip on their shoulder), but I've still been accused of finding what I want to find, seeing racism where it doesn't really exist. Well, I can take that.*

The exercise reinforced how, despite all these experiences and research, my social networks, like those of the vast majority of the White middle class in this country, are still very White. Nonetheless I was still taken aback when, in a recent study of attitudes to sport, few of the White people I presumed to be well connected were able to provide a single referral to someone in minoritised ethnic communities.

Connections within the research team and with our research respondents

The asymmetry that we have referred to relates not just to differences in treatment, but to the ability to walk away and take time out from our racialised existence. All those in the project team are acutely aware of the operations of 'race', but we were obliged to recognise that issues of 'race' are ones that the White researchers periodically engaged with, but did not have to live with (in part because of class and spatial factors). It is hardly surprising that someone who has lived with racial prejudice for many years interprets in racialised terms what someone else might see as ambiguous.

Of course we knew about the asymmetry of racial awareness, but this exercise really brought it home to us. What to Jonathan was just a trite song, to Kevin was another early marker of his increasingly racialised identity. The asymmetry of our stories in terms of their awareness of everyday racialised experiences is indicative of broader patterns in European society. There is more room for White identities to be framed in terms of intersections with other characteristics like class, gender, (dis)ability or sexual orientation, than there is for Black people who are typically obliged to recognise the primacy of racialised distinctions. As Knowles (2003: p.73) observes:

> White lives are also raced and ethnicised by different but related means. Race is less transparent in White auto/biographies for a number of reasons. Stories of racial privilege are less dramatic than stories of disadvantage. Privilege imposes less upon its subjects and their consciousness. Privilege is,

> in the main, taken for granted: it is disadvantage that makes itself felt, and as being felt erupt into narrative and politics.

Whereas most White people in the UK share the privilege of taking their for granted[6], the reverse is true with Black people continually having to justify the circumstances of their Blackness. This lies at the core of Critical Race Theory (Hylton, 2009; Hylton, 2015b), though of course the primacy of 'race' has been challenged by other critical theorists, including Marxists (e.g. Darder and Torres, 2004). At the same time we both need to be wary of taking for granted the 'privileges' of middle class, non-disabled, hetero-sexual males and appreciating the burden of constantly being defined in ethnic terms. In such circumstances we should not be surprised when people from minoritised ethnic communities choose to participate in sport with others from the same community to relieve that pressure of justification (Hylton, 2011; Fletcher and Walle, 2015). The privilege of an assumed racialised norm can only be experienced by Black groups when participating in segregated environments, something that, especially in the sports world, is typically denigrated by the organisational establishment and many White players. Because Whiteness is the norm, if Black people engaging in sport and leisure object to established practices and language, it is they who are considered to be at fault (Fletcher and Hylton, in press).

As we had not previously considered some of the insights offered by colleagues it might suggest that we are not always best equipped to interpret our own experiences / behaviours. That might also imply we similarly have to beware the accounts our research participants offer us of their experiences. Equally, there were other observations that the original authors were confident were misplaced, so we need to beware the possibility of researchers not just mis-interpreting but also over-interpreting.

Sharing details of our lives that rarely appear in public was not an easy exercise to engage in. Research methodologists write frequently about empathy and walking in other people's shoes (hooks, 1994; Tuhiwai Smith 2006; Roberts, 2013). Some of the 'mistaken' responses from people who know us quite well serve to show how easy it is for researchers to fall short of the goals of empathetic research. Our chastened reaction to occasional presumptuous or apparently waspish comments from people we consider friends was a salutary reminder of just what we ask our research participants to sign-up to when we engage them in our research and emphasises our responsibility to them.

In the context of the research that we have engaged in over the years some of the most problematic and uncomfortable moments have been negotiating the process in contract research. The nature of contract research privileges an external client's desire for research to assist them in achieving their own goals. Any clash of ideologies is unequal given the power relations involved. Invariably our starting point has to be the client's even when we would not philosophically choose their original premise. We then try to raise aspirations so that in exploring the liminal spaces of the marginalised communities that our clients may not fully understand, and want to explore, we can work with those 'othered' groups and help to reformulate organisational agendas. For example, in a systematic review of the literature on Black and minoritised ethnic communities in sport and physical recreation that we

completed for the race equality body Sporting Equals and the UK sports councils (Long et al., 2009) we sought to: a) manage expectations regarding the breadth and quality of the literature in the field that would be admitted into the review; and b) raise aspirations to encourage these key stakeholders to adopt and build upon the recommendations emerging from the study.

Like Lorna Roberts (2013: p.342) we are sensitive to the risk of alienating marginalised groups through consultation fatigue (worrying about whether we were taking more than we were giving back), and the risk of reinforcing difference by working with racial and ethnic labels. She goes on to remind us that 'research… plays a role in framing the very phenomenon it sought to investigate'. For us then it is not enough to be silent on the lived effects of 'race' and racism, to merely espouse ideas of social justice or merely be 'not racist' (Trepagnier, 2010). In looking to identify what constitutes desirable change we need to look beyond the principles of distributive justice outlined in Chapter 2 and extend them to redistribution through restorative justice making reparation for previous injustices. Critical research on 'race' needs to move beyond liberal incrementalism and challenge not just existing distributions, but dominant modes of thought. An ahistorical analysis that does not take into account previous distributive injustices accruing through racialised inequalities is unlikely to produce proper understanding or result in fundamental change. This is not just a matter of the distribution of resources, but of competing worldviews.

As Lorde (1979) observed, 'the master's tools cannot dismantle the master's house'. In other words, minor adjustments to promote greater efficiency are unlikely to fulfil the more pressing need for the transformation of racialised relations and the material circumstances accruing from them. A 'redistributive justice' is closer to the social justice agenda that has underpinned our research and subsequent messages over two decades. It also endorses approaches to social justice where inequalities that have favoured already privileged social groups are redressed through a 'bias' toward those previously under-represented in research. Furthermore, Roithmayr (2014) argues that where those previously privileged, which includes both authors, do not challenge their own positions and ability to effect change then they 'lock-in' structural inequalities and the power relations of the status quo.

Conclusions

We do not claim to have all of the epistemological or ontological answers as a result of this exercise, but it certainly casts in stark relief some of the challenges involved in researching 'othered' segments of society. The use of biographical reflections in this chapter has enabled us to:

> …look inwards and outwards at the same time. It displays the existential as some of the unique features of lives, at its interface with the social landscape. The story of the self inevitably involves others and hence also inevitably opens onto the social landscape (Knowles, 2003: p.52).

Through the lens of critical theories like CRT we are reminded that the task when using biographies to analyse 'race' and ethnicity is to move beyond purely

individualised experiences to consider the contextual forces of power and ideology (cf. Kivel et al., 2009).

Fundamentally, our research participants have the right to expect that the version of their world that is reported is not one unthinkingly filtered by an asymmetrical relationship. However, we recognise the strengths of critique and subjectivities. We already know about the significance of the understanding of the insider as opposed to the outsider (e.g. Long and Blackshaw, 2000: p.240), but given the nature of multiply identified social beings it is questionable when any researcher can truly be an insider (Fletcher, 2014). Hence the salience of this kind of work to understand our own standpoints, not as an exercise in self-flagellation over privilege, but to raise awareness that apparently similar stimuli may be very different because they are being experienced in the context of distinct habituses. It is also the responsibility of the researcher to expound those differentiated positions in decision-making environments. Beyond that, though, we can use our very different positionings in a racialised society to argue for the importance of including people from minoritised ethnic communities at decision-making tables.

Our research has always drawn on principles of social justice (see for example, Hylton and Long, 2015; Hylton, 2015a; Hylton, 2012; Long et al., 2014; Long and Hylton, 2014) yet social justice cannot be taken for granted nor utilised opportunistically or cynically as a principle. We agree with Erickson (2010) who states that, at its best, research should advance human rights and dignity. We have done this by respecting racialised problematics, and by not taking our own subject positions for granted. We write elsewhere (Long & Hylton, 2002: p.100) that:

> ...Examining 'Whiteness' more closely should allow researchers to make it visible and open to discussion. Moreover, an understanding of its construction generates the possibility of a clearer understanding of the processes of racism, hence a better chance of disrupting them. The paper demonstrates the complexity of these processes and their interpretation, **which cannot, of course, be achieved independently of the researchers' own Blackness and Whiteness** [emphasis added].

We certainly do not presume any essentialised Black or White experience, but if we are to understand issues of sociality we need to appreciate distinctions between our own circumstances and those of the research participants we are working with. Without that we are likely to transpose our reasoning onto their actions. Our ontological propositions are products of our way of knowing which is, in turn, shaped by our own appreciation of the meanings that shape racialised encounters. Black and White experiences are not separate; in processes of meaning-making each interacts with the other. As Stanfield (1993, p.4) insisted:

> …the study of racial and ethnic issues in the social sciences remained deeply grounded in societal folk belief. Thus conceptualisations of research problems and interpretation of data… often have been preceded by *a priori* ideological and cultural biases that determine the production of "objective knowledge".

Reflective exercises like this one can help to sensitise researchers to the epistemological and policy implications of Stanfield's concerns. In this regard we have been very fortunate to conduct our research as part of a multi-ethnic team with co-researchers prepared to challenge our interpretations. Whereas Reinharz (1983) believed that research is about self-discovery just as much as learning about others, we argue that we can hardly expect to learn about others if we are unable to learn about ourselves.

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[1] Though there is debate on the inclusivity of this term, 'Black' is used throughout as an umbrella term to include those who, as a result of colour, physiognomy or culture, suffer from racism and xenophobia.
[2] The term 'White' is used throughout as an inclusive term to recognise a socially constructed group recognised through commonly held physiognomic and physical, state and individually determined identifiers of Whiteness.
[3] Professor Karl Spracklen, Leeds Beckett University and Dr. Ben Carrington, University of Texas at Austin.
[4] The term 'Black and minoritised ethnic' reflects the common policy label of 'black and minority ethnic' often reduced to the acronym 'BME'. In this case 'minoritised' also denotes the dynamic processes that might reduce Black women who are part of a majority into a minority. Similarly, as demographics shift and superdiversity becomes commonplace in the UK there are cities where the 'majority' is the 'minority' but still 'minoritised'.
[5] Combat 18 was a Far Right neo-Nazi group in the UK. '18' relates to the location of Adolf Hitler's initials in the alphabet.

[6] We recognise there may be exceptions – e.g. poor White people living in some parts of Bradford.