Qualitative Sociology, Vol. 19, No. 4, 1996

The Outsider Looks In: Constructing Knowledge About American Collegiate Racism

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This study tackles one of the most complex and intriguing issues in contemporary society, namely, the phenomenon of racism. Instead of examining the structural dimensions of racism, it focuses on the interpersonal "everyday racism" that occurs among students. Using the University of Minnesota as a case study, the study employs qualitative research methods to offer new perspectives on everyday racism as perceived through the eyes of a Black foreign female student. Popular portrayals of the midwestern United States present a relatively liberal milieu where racism only subtly affects social relations, and where there is "zero tolerance" for the politics of exclusion. However, the findings of this study illustrate that everyday racism is alive and well in the collegiate environment. Epistemological issues are elaborated, arguing for the position of an interpretive and reflexive rather than a positivist approach to social research.

INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the daily, seemingly innocuous interactions between students at the University of Minnesota and illustrates how "everyday racism" manifests itself in such an environment. The study offers a different perspective on the subject matter at hand. In classical anthropology and ethnographic sociology Western scholars study non-Western societies and subordinate groups within Western societies. For an African researcher to conduct an ethnographic study on racism in the U.S. is to take the lens and turn it on the photographer.[2]

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The issue of everyday racism in eastern Africa, where I come from, is little more than an academic subject with the vast majority of the population rarely confronting its realities. My experience in the United States was, therefore, a rude awakening to the fact that my skin color was some kind of caveat emitting negative vibrations and occasioning spontaneous reactions from people around me. Suddenly, I became extremely conscious of the chocolate-brown skin I had always taken for granted. At the same time I became keenly aware of the color of everybody around me. In this racially-stratified society I soon discovered that theorizing about racism was one thing; "living it" quite another.

My limited experience in the U.S. and an initial fascination with the issue of racism raised a number of sociological and ethnographic questions: How does racism manifest itself among college students? How does it affect their behavioral interaction? What "coping mechanisms" do students of color develop to handle the problem? Subconsciously, I hoped that this study would help unburden some of the heavy load that was beginning to weigh my heart down.

The primary purpose of this paper is to focus on the following methodological question: what role did I play as a researcher in influencing the construction of knowledge about the research question? Although it will not provide a full exposition of my findings on collegiate racism in the United States, some descriptions from my extensive fieldwork and interviews will be given in illustration of the phenomenon.

THE RESEARCH QUESTION AND METHOD

The Meaning of "Racism"

The study concentrated on the day-to-day experiences of racism among students at the University of Minnesota, a large, predominantly White institution. Philomena Essed (1991) coined the useful term, "Everyday Racism" to capture the lived experience of racism by minority people. Her theory was constructed to bridge the gap between the cognitive experience of racism and its broader structural or ideological dimensions. In linking the macro and micro dimensions of racism, Essed moved the everyday manifestations of racism from the realm of the autobiographical and literary to an analytical and scientific context. Everyday racism, according to her, involves systematic, recurrent and familiar practices that are derived from socialized attitudes and behaviors. Central to Essed's theory of everyday racism is the concept of experience. Personal accounts as well as vicarious experiences of racism are the *sine qua non* of everyday racism. The emphasis is not racist individuals per se but rather on racist practices and their implications. Thus, patterns of interaction were crucial in this study.

But what exactly do we understand by the term "racism"? Since racism is often so complex and abstract, it is imperative that I address myself briefly to its meaning and explicate how it is used in this paper. The idea of race (like that of gender) is based on the notion of *difference* which is reinforced by intellectual gatekeepers to rationalize their domination (Guillaumin 1980).[3] It follows therefore that "racism," a derivative of the term "race," is as much a social construction as its root idea. This is clearly demonstrated by the arbitrariness with which different racial groups are categorized.[4] Nowhere is the absurdity of the race concept more apparent than in the case of German Jews. The Nuremberg Laws were a deliberate attempt on the part of the Nazi party to racialize Jews — a people that were physically very similar to Caucasians or Whites. In this way, racism constructed a "Semitic race" by promoting the mystical concept known as *Volksgeist* among the German people which fed anti-Semitic sentiments during the Nazi regime (Mosse 1966).

References to the inferiority of certain races precede the late nineteenth century but none of them had the backing of supposedly scientific theories in the manner of those which emerged in the late nineteenth century.[5] Placing White supremacy in a scientific ideological context with an established doctrine became crucial at the height of slavery and colonialism (Benedict 1959; Montagu 1974; Pierre-Charles 1980). At this time, "Racialism"[6] became an important ideological weapon of nationalist and imperialist politics (Benedict 1959; Montagu 1974; Rooy 1990). For this reason, racist thought is inherently ethnocentric (Marger 1985); it is a classic example of how social thought in Western societies reflects their relationship to the dominated societies, peoples, and classes (Fenton 1980). Attempts to valorize "race" and to provide a scientific foundation for the genetic difference between "superior beings" and "inferior races" continue to this day as is evidenced by recent publications such as Herrnstein and Murray's controversial text, *The Bell Curve* (1994).[7]

Racialist theories within the social sciences were primarily based on biological and physical-anthropological studies. Biological racists argued that immutable differences existed between the races, with Blacks being biologically and permanently inferior to Whites (Locke 1992). Furthermore, anthropomorphic measurements of the skull and other body parts claimed to distinguish the different races (Dominguez 1994). "Scientific" theorizing about racialism is usually traced back to the works of two nineteenth century scholars, namely Arthur de Gobineau's *Essai sur l' inégalité des races humaines* (1854)[8] and Charles Darwin's Origin of Species (1859).[9] These dominant racial theories have been challenged by exposing their sociopolitical characteristics (e.g., see Du Bois 1903; Lorde 1986; Omi and Winant 1986; and Matsuda et al. 1993).

Following the above discussion, I adopt the conception by Omi and Winant (1986) which views racism as those social practices which (explicitly or implicitly) attribute merit or allocate values to members of racially categorized groups solely because of their "race." Some theorists have found it useful to make a distinction between vertical and horizontal racism (e.g., see Harris and Ordona 1991). Vertical racism refers to White racism against Blacks and other minorities, while horizontal racism refers to the hostility that exists between people of color among themselves. Harris and Ordona (1991) describe horizontal racism as the "step-child" of vertical racism but prefer to use the term "cross-racial hostility" rather than horizontal racism because, as they argue, using the term "racism" in the former case is misleading as such relationship lacks power (also see Wellman 1993). Such a perspective would incorrectly put vertical racism at the same level as horizontal racism. They further argue that cross-racial hostility is a spill-over or internalization of White racism; the only difference is that it is devoid of the power element. In other words, the stereotypical images painted about minority people by the majoritarian population are internalized by other minorities. The dominant group's yardstick of measuring intelligence, success, morals, beauty, etc., is thus adopted by the minorities and they internalize the concept that characteristics of a certain social group are attributable to genetic "inferiority."

The distinction between vertical and horizontal racism jettisons the reductionist view which argues that racism is simply racial prejudice which leads to stereotyping and discrimination. From this point on I will use Harris and Ordona's term, "cross-racial hostility" instead of the deceptive "horizontal racism." Furthermore, I concentrate on the micro dimensions of racism, otherwise called "everyday racism." It is also important to note that the basic notions that colored the racist thinking of Gobineau and his followers are the same ones that continue to influence conscious or unconscious racism in contemporary societies.[10]

Methods

The study lasted a total of 20 weeks. I spent much of the winter and spring of 1994 conducting field research at a study/eating area situated in a busy location on campus. The field site was ideal for my study for a number of reasons: First, it was a place where students of all races and ethnic backgrounds congregated on a daily basis. These included: Whites, Blacks, Asians, Hispanics, American-Indians and Arabs. This heterogeneity provided an ideal setting to observe inter-racial interactions among students. Secondly, the size of the field site (approximately 40 by 80 feet) was attractive in that it was neither too large to inhibit close observation nor too small to limit generalizations. The arrangement of the tables, i.e., clusters and singles, facilitated the easy observation of patterns as it provided a natural discriminant sitting arrangement and spatial manipulation. Five rows of four-table clusters were fixed to the floor and occupied a rectangular portion in the middle of the room. More tables run along the four walls in a single row of singles and doubles to make a total of forty-four. On either side of the 2.5 square-feet tables was a chair attached to the table by a hollow black iron bar. A 45-degree swivel of the chairs allowed the users to negotiate their way around the crammed tables before they could settle down comfortably. Thirdly, the site was ideal for its multi-faceted roles. Because students went there to eat, study, chat or simply wile the time away between classes, it offered a unique opportunity to observe students in a variety of social interactions.[11] Finally, as a student myself, I blended in easily with the "subjects" thus minimizing the problem of obtrusiveness.

The first half of the project was devoted to participant observation. For at least two hours every day, five days each week, I "hung out" at the field site at different times of the day. As a covert observer, I spent approximately 150 hours observing students' behavioral interaction. During this period I was very alert to nonverbal communication between students. In her classic book, *Body Politics,* Nancy Henley (1977) conducts a psychoanalytic study of how nonverbal behavior bound to people's power relationships. She notes: "The 'trivia' of everyday life — touching others, moving closer or farther away, dropping the eyes, smiling, interrupting — are commonly interpreted as facilitating social intercourse, but not recognized in their position as micropolitical gestures, defenders of the status quo — of the state, of the wealthy, of authority, of all those whose power may be challenged" (1977: 3). Subsequently, in order to gain a better understanding of "what's going on" I conducted intensive nonstructured interviews with fifteen students who were regulars at the field site representing the whole spectrum of the racial cosmos at the University of Minnesota. The interviewees constituted a "theoretical sample" of students consciously selected to represent all the racial/ethnic groups within the student body (see Glaser and Strauss 1967). All interviews were recorded and transcribed. The names of all informants have been altered to provide anonymity.

A BRIEF REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The issue of the researcher's accessibility to sociological knowledge and his or her contribution to its growth has been a long-standing debate in the discipline of sociology. With both epistemological and ontological dimensions, it addresses questions such as: Who can be a "knower"? What qualifies as legitimate knowledge? What kinds of things can be known? (Harding 1987).

Durkheim set the standard for present-day sociology as a prestigious, "truth"-seeking discipline (comparable to the physical sciences), removing it from common everyday knowledge of the "nonprofessionals." He held the belief that the social world has an underlying order describable like the natural order as a system of laws (Durkheim 1938). To Durkheim, society, or social facts, should be viewed as hard external "things" capable of being studied in the same way as the study of natural science. Given this assumption, Durkheim had no problem with applying the methodology of the natural sciences to the social world. He carefully codified the rules of a rigorous discipline of sociology, rules which govern the current positivistic paradigm to-date. Durkheim called upon sociologists to observe and explain social facts causally ("seek separately the efficient cause which produces it and the function it fulfills") from a detached position, "discovering" them in the same way a natural scientist would physical facts. Not only must the sociologist "emancipate himself from the fallacious ideas that dominate the mind of the layman," but he must also "endeavor to consider them from an aspect that is independent of their individual manifestations" (Durkheim 1938: 32 and 45). Such a framework is supposed to facilitate replicability. In other words, an objective, value-free study should be amenable to replication by other sociologists and yield similar results.

Many sociologists have criticized the positivistic stance of objective, value-free research as not only being unattainable (even by strangers), but also undesirable for conducting scientific social research (e.g., Gouldner 1962; McClung Lee 1986; Coser 1990). They emphasize the fact that no social scientist can approach any research question with a mind that is a *tabula rasa*. As Christman (1988 p. 73) correctly pointed out, "researcher bias is present in all research . . . the problem selection, methodological stance, and theoretical orientation all reflect the researcher's position in society, world view, and personal experience." Critics of the orthodox mode of sociological research have suggested various reasons for its insistence on the value-free, objective and generalizable criteria in social research. McClung Lee (1986) and Harding (1987) attribute it to the blind imitation of the methods of the "more prestigious" physical or natural sciences. Gouldner (1962), on the other hand, suggests that the value-free doctrine serves to mask personal and institutional interests.

It is not surprising that some of the earliest challenges to the orthodox positivistic approach came from those who were most often objectified in sociological research — women, Blacks, colonials, and other subjugated classes. Within the last three decades feminists especially have made great efforts to expose the role played by the subjective in the construction of knowledge. Sociologist Dorothy Smith (1974), for example, denounced the ethic of objectivity and advocated a method built on a relationship between subject and object, one of relationship rather than distance. She further argued that as sociological researchers, we should not discard our experienced world as a source of reliable information or as a basis for suggestions about the character of the world (also see Reinharz 1979).

These marginal groups projected the debate around the outsider doctrine to new dimensions by advancing arguments for the insider researcher. They argue that only members of a certain group possess the intuitive sensitivity that makes empathetic understanding of that group possible (Hare 1970; Smith 1987). Merton (1972) succinctly stated the insider doctrine thus:

> Only through continued socialization in the life of a group can one become fully aware of its symbolisms and socially shared realities; only so can one understand the fine-grained meanings of behavior, feelings, and values; only so can one decipher the unwritten grammar of conduct and the nuances of cultural idiom. (Merton 1972: 15)

Collins (1987) carried the debate further by introducing the concept of the "Outsider Within." To demonstrate her thesis, she argued that Black female intellectuals are not complete insiders within the discipline of sociology whose traditional values hold ethnocentric, androcentric and middle-class biases. She drew attention to the unique experience of Black women in the triple-oppression based on race, gender, and class. Collins contends that Black women's experienced reality of marginality provides them with a special perspective which is not accessible by outsiders who have not experienced the same systematic oppression. This contention is reminiscent of Marx's theory of knowledge. His argument that knowledge is based on experience has been adopted by other feminist standpoint theorists such as Smith (1974), Flax (1983), and Hartsock (1987).

However, several ethnographers have acknowledged the fact that no single field worker occupies a single status of Insider, Outsider or Outsider-Within (e.g., Rosaldo 1983; Kondo 1991; Abu-Lughod 1991). They recognize that individuals have multiple identities and for that reason, will inevitably share some statuses with the researched group and not others. Abu-Lughod (1991: 14) was right on the mark when she described the field worker as constantly "standing on shifting ground." She reasoned that womanhood for instance, was only a partial identity for the female researcher. This means that "we work from fragmented selves and we must work together as different selves who only partially intersect" (1990: 25). In other words, researchers must move beyond the impasse of the fixed self/other or subject/object dichotomies. Her point was that each situation influences the researcher's construction of knowledge depending on the vantage point adopted.

This underlying reality has persuaded various scholars to demonstrate the importance of self-analysis by the researcher to achieve a better understanding of the subjects of sociological inquiry (e.g., Smith 1974; Millman and Kanter 1975; Reinharz 1979; Roberts 1981). In her article, "*Beyond 'Subjectivity',*" Susan Krieger (1985) implores field workers to pay close attention to the relationship between themselves and the observed because:

> We bring biases and more than biases. We bring idiosyncratic patterns of recognition. We are not, in fact, ever capable of achieving the analytic "distance" we have long been schooled to seek . . . how we interpret ourselves . . . may add something fresh and significant to the development of sophistication in social science. (Krieger 1985: 309)

Such self-analysis and self-reflexivity is especially crucial for field researchers who, by the very nature of their work, engage in prolonged interaction with the people they are studying.

What role does the field researcher play in influencing the data-gathering and analytic process of the study? In addressing this question, field workers are not underrating their findings but rather, are avoiding the danger of "doing injustice to the reality of the 'other' (by) having a full enough sense of self" (Krieger 1985: 320). It is a means to thinking more intelligently and fully about social life through increased personal understanding (Also see Krieger 1991; Stanley and Wise 1983).

In the following pages I explicate the way in which my multiple identifications shaped the construction of knowledge in this study. I show how these identifications emerged relationally with respect to the data and experience out of which I constructed this knowledge. Most of the time these roles overlapped, shifting back and forth, and back again, at any one given point of the project, with significant implications for the study. They also had an important influence on the meaning I attached to specific data. Thus, a lot of what emerges from this study reflects my sense of what is true (cf. Anderson 1990). In so far as it does not deny the self, this study is a contribution to the ongoing struggle of challenging the standard sociological paradigm that downplays the self in scientific knowledge-construction.

ANALYSIS OF MY PLURAL ROLES

Understanding who I am is an essential precursor to the issue of how the multifaceted roles I occupy affected the course of the research, my interaction with informants, and the study's findings: My formative years were largely an African middle-class experience. The oldest of six children, I went to school in Uganda and became a lawyer. I obtained a master of laws from Harvard in 1988, and then returned to Uganda where I worked as a law lecturer for five years. In 1993, I returned to the United States to pursue Ph.D. studies in Sociology and Feminist Studies. Now thirty-two years old and married, many people have commented that I could easily pass for a regular American undergraduate. During my previous stay in the United States, I socialized mostly with international students from the "third world" and had only a minimal interaction with White people.

As a Black/Foreigner

In 1959, John Howard Griffin (an Anglo-American) used medication, ultraviolet rays, and dyes to acquire the "appropriate" skin color when he wanted to study what it *really* felt like to be a Negro in the south (Griffin 1961). Although my skin pigmentation is naturally Black, in many ways, I shared Griffin's anxieties, naivete and discoveries in the course of my field research. Like him, I was consciously "living" racism first hand for the first time. Prior to the study, my outsider status had "protected" me from a lot of the pain and degradation that comes with a heightened sensitivity to racism.[12] The study taught me what other people of color in this country already knew: that racism is as much a part of American life as apple pie and baseball, and that it is multifaceted. Racism can be vertical or present itself in the form of cross-racial hostility and runs on a continuum from greatly blatant to extremely subtle.[13]

The color of my skin was an important asset to this inquiry as it facilitated my process of knowing. At the field site, I deliberately sat on the side of the room which had joint double tables simply to observe which people were more likely to take the free table adjacent to mine. At lunch time, the room would often fill to capacity with the only free table being the one next to mine. I observed many White and Asian students enter with trays of food, scan the room for a place to sit, their eyes resting on the free table next to mine for the briefest of moments and then decide to leave. The few who were bold enough to approach the free table often asked in the "Minnesota Nice"[14] style, "Is this table free?" before sitting down. It was at times like these that I was acutely aware of the lens-turned-on-the-photographer metaphor referred to in the introduction.

As a foreigner, it took me some time to figure out the "Minnesota Nice" facade. In my initial analysis I misinterpreted it thus:

> White students seem to be overly sensitive to any action that may be interpreted as racist. That is why they were bending over backwards to ask the irrational and superfluous question, "Is this table taken?" when they find a vacant table next to one occupied by a minority student. It is their way of proceeding cautiously to ensure that minority students do not translate any of their actions as rude or racist!

Had I been a native of this country I probably would have quickly picked up this behavior as exhibiting the well-known "Minnesota Nice" behavior. In other words, had I been an insider, I would have been able to "decipher the unwritten grammar" of the Minnesota Nice conduct. The truth subsequently became more apparent when I noticed that the question was not only directed to minority students but even to fellow White students. As the study progressed, I was also to discover that White students were not as self-reflexive about their racist behavior as I had given them credit in the analysis quoted above.

Not only did Whites and Asians avoid sitting next to me, but when I sat next to them, many of them vacated their tables within a few "polite" minutes of my arrival. This behavior was not restricted to me personally but I observed a pattern with most Black students who took tables next to White students. For those others who were not too racist to flee, I normally noticed their slight but visible shifting and rearrangement when a Black person sat next to them. I recorded one such incident in my field notes, thus:

> On returning from re-heating my lunch, I found two White women sitting at the table next to mine. As I sat down I noticed their slight but visible shifting and rearrangement on realizing that I was the person occupying the table next to theirs. One of them, who had placed her bag and jacket on the chair across from me nervously asked, "Is this stuff in your way?" This was a superfluous question since my bag was already resting on the bench next to me and I was not carrying anything that would call for such concern on her part. The question was probably part of the discomfort they felt by my presence.

During my observations I also noticed that White people have a distinctive way of staring at people of color; like one would stare at something "exotic." This was especially true for minorities whose physical appearance differs most from that of Whites such as American-Indians and Blacks. The following field note illustrates this point:

> There is a White man sitting in the north-east corner of the room who has been staring at me for some time. When I stare back he quickly shifts his stare but as soon as I look away, he resumes staring. He is about 35 years old, has brown hair and a Hitler-type mustache . . . . As he stares, his elbows are resting on the table and he is covering his mouth with both fists. He is very cool and collected.

The words I used to describe the man's mustache reflected the frustration and anger that I felt at the time. My response to his persistent stare had immediately invoked feelings of nazism, racism, and xenophobia. His stare was not flirtatious; it was not my femininity that he was ogling. It was a curious kind of stare — as a child would stare at animals in a zoo. Shifting his stare every time I stared back at him denied me subjectivity and interaction while giving him power over me. Here, my anxieties as a Black foreign researcher in a predominantly White setting were accentuated and this, no doubt, colored the interpretation that I attached to the incident.

At the same time, my "Blackness" sometimes rendered me invisible to "paler" students. On Valentine's day, for example, three Asian students entered the field site with bundles of Valentine roses for sale. They approached virtually every table aggressively soliciting buyers. Below, I quote my melancholic field note:

> I was the only Black person in the room at the time and when they got to my table, they looked right through me and walked past me! It was as if I was not there . . . . All I could do was follow their receding backs with fiery eyes.

Rollins (1985) argued that one of the ways that racism manifests itself is by the dominant group ignoring the very existence of minorities. In this case it was manifested through cross-racial hostility.

In the course of the interviews, it was quite evident how my different attributes influenced the ways informants responded to my questions, which in turn affected the knowledge they passed on to me. Race relations in the U.S. are such that whenever two people of different races are interacting, the issue of race occupies a prominent place in their consciousness for the duration of the interaction. Race was always salient and part of the dynamic in my interviews, because of and in spite of the subject matter of the study. The fact that Black is at the base of the racial hierarchy means that it receives the biggest dose of racism in this country. This made every informant from the lighter races quite sensitive to what they said concerning issues of racism. For example, Kelly, a White female whom I interviewed was quick to assert that people's skin-color was not a big deal as far as she was concerned despite the fact that I had observed her several times avoiding minorities and meticulously selecting whom she sat next to at the field site. She went on to say:

> I really have a problem with the media lately, especially you know . . . local news and the stuff in there. The portrayal of minorities . . . I think it's just completely disgusting. Especially criminal stuff. African-American men are plastered on the T.V. . . . they portray them as the only criminals around.

Kelly could have said this out of genuine concern. However, what suggested to me that she might have expressed such sentiments simply because they had a "politically correct" flavor to them (especially to a Black interviewer), was the way she spoke these words directly to the tape recorder. Her words seemed to convey the message, "Let it go on record that I think there's racism out there; but I have nothing to do with it. I am on your side."

In her study on White women and racism, Ruth Frankenberg (a White woman) also found that it was not always easy to get her subjects to talk about issues of race and racism. She attributed this primarily to the sensitivity of the topic arguing that, ". . . in a racially hierarchical society, White women have to repress, avoid, and conceal a great deal in order to maintain a stance of 'not noticing' color" (Frankenberg 1993: 33). This suggests that the sensitivity of White interviewees to the issue of racism is not limited to situations where the interviewer is Black. However, in my own study, there were various cues which suggested that subjects were reacting to me, a Black female foreigner, thus confounding the complex and sensitive subject matter. More examples from my interview with Kelly will help clarify this point.

At another stage, I asked Kelly, "When you were growing up, do you remember ever getting minority visitors at home?" Kelly uncrossed her legs and crossed them again, stared up into space for a long while before responding, "Um, it's hard to remember. It makes me think . . . Gee, there had to be at least some . . . you know, but I can't remember any." Perhaps Kelly would have responded in a similar round-about fashion had the same question been posed by say, a White interviewer. But the tell-tale signs were there to show that I, personally was a big source of her uneasiness. While she did not want to tell an outright lie, Kelly felt uncomfortable giving a direct answer because she thought that by so doing, her family would be portrayed as racist to a Black interviewer. Averting her gaze from me and uncrossing her legs were two vital pieces of evidence of Kelly's discomfit in "exposing" herself to a Black foreigner.

Similar efforts to gain my approval and to demonstrate how "liberal" Kelly was can be gleaned from the following example: Question: "What do you think of students from other racial backgrounds?" Response: "I really like to have people around from diverse backgrounds. It's really boring to have people . . . you know everybody is like you . . . ." My rather amused analysis note to this response was: "So for Kelly, racial diversity is nothing more than having a Neapolitan ice-cream!" This time Kelly spoke while directly looking at me. Her beseeching eyes seemed to call for my approval. At that point, I felt kind of sorry for Kelly and offered a nonverbal acknowledgment by way of nodding.

Instances demonstrating how my skin-color influenced the information given to me were numerous. The following excerpt from an interview with Maria, a native of Mexico provides another example.

S: Would you date someone from a different race than yours?
M: I dated a White man once.
S: Would you date a Black guy?
M: (pause) um . . . yes, I think so. I think so, (my emphasis) especially after taking this class on Race, Class and Gender . . . Before, my mind used to be very closed.
S: And would your folks have any problem if you introduced a Black guy to them as your fiancé?
M: Mmm . . . . I don't know.

On the one hand Maria could have been rethinking her personal life in the context of an important class; on the other hand the question made her uneasy. In the margin of my field notes next to Maria's response to the question: "Would you date a Black guy?", I pencil-scribbled, "gaze dropped" and "higher voice pitch." These actions may indicate either her cross-racial hostility with dating or her uncertainty and how the class challenged her assumptions. It could have been both, but clearly my personal attributes had a lot to do with these reactions.

The above illustrations aptly demonstrate how my skin-color placed constraints on the amount and quality of information elicited from White informants. The subject matter of the study made Whites least likely to be my confidantes.

The prospect of talking to a Black person about race relations among students at the University of Minnesota seemed too much for some students. Whereas White students were very eager to be interviewed (not wanting to appear racist, perhaps?), Asians were particularly suspicious of the motive behind such an exercise.[15] Many of those I approached requesting an interview flatly refused to take part. Their refusals were revealing. Culture could be part of the reason why many Asians were reluctant to talk to me. But it could also have been due to the location that Asians occupy on the racial hierarchy. Although Asian students fall within the category of racial minorities, their position in American society is significantly more privileged than say, that of Blacks, Hispanics, and American-Indians. Indeed, as several informants revealed to me, they are regarded as the "model-minority" in the United States. Of course this stereotypical descriptor is a myth for many Asians in the United States and cannot be generalized across the different south-east Asian nationalities. However, it is arguable that many of the Asians in college are in many ways more privileged than other minorities. Such elevated status, therefore, would put them in a tricky situation, making it difficult for them to talk about racism to a minority student who ranks at the very bottom of the racial hierarchy.

My shared status with Black students had the opposite effect. They immediately regarded me as an insider and forged a kind of collaboration that struck an instant rapport in our conversations. Had I been a White researcher, for example, I would have missed the meanings of some nonverbal communication that Black students share amongst themselves. For example, when I made eye contact with Black students many would acknowledge me by a nod, waving or saying hello regardless of the fact that were total strangers. There would have been no way for a non-Black observer watching us in this interaction to know that we did not even know each other. Neither would such a researcher have known that these gestures of solidarity or comradeship are simply one survival mechanism that Black students employ to deal with the racism around them. Indeed, those small gestures of acknowledgment and camaraderie often made the dreary and dispiriting exercise at the site a lot more bearable.

Black students spoke to me without inhibition. While they often volunteered anecdotal experiences of racism, it was taboo for White students to even discuss third-party incidents of racism that they may have witnessed. Aisha, an African-American woman, responded this way to my compliment on how smart she looked: "Well thank you . . .," then she leaned toward me and lowered her voice, "you know, today is my T.A. day and I have to look good in order to feel good and to act good. There's a way that these *White students* (my emphasis) look at you . . . perceive you . . . it's a psychological thing and I take advantage of it." In my analysis notes following this data entry I interpreted Aisha's words thus: "This is a good example to illustrate the fact that students of color at the University of Minnesota have to make extra effort to legitimize themselves in order to combat the extant stereotypes about their lot." Although Aisha did not mention it, I suspect that her gender also had something to do with her worries; the gender-hierarchy which pervades our societies leads most women in authoritative positions to be conscious of their gender. However, in Aisha's case the racial factor entered the equation to compound her worries.

Bayo, an African male student said:

> My experience here . . . you know . . . you read about all this stuff and until you come over here and experience it you'll never know how bad it is. You know . . . we think . . . I used to think that the Blacks here whine a lot, complaining about racism all the time. But when you come over here you experience it.

When Bayo used the phrase "you know," it was not merely a "stumbling inarticulateness" but intended as a verb (cf. Devault 1990). As African-to-African, he expected me to know what he was talking about. Further, by including me in the phrase "we think," Bayo assumed or implied our common "outsider-within status." He took it for granted that I (as a Black African), held the same preconceptions about American society as he did. He was not only talking to me as a researcher, but as a person who shared similar experiences and someone who might empathize with the experience of African-Americans. And in fact, because Bayo's words were reminiscent of my own experience, I knew exactly what he was talking about.

Even non-Black foreigners drew upon my outsider-status in understanding their experiences of everyday racism in this society. A good illustration of this is my interview with Li, an Asian informant who related an emotional episode he experienced about a month prior to our interview. About half-way through the interview, Li looked at me with moistened eyes and a flushed face and said:

> Usually the way they express racism is more subtle. This White woman didn't say something expressly but she just winced . . . actually I asked her some questions and after she answered my question she, you know . . . (screws up his face) made some facial expression. I need to talk to my advisor or the special committee. There is some committee that you can complain to, I think I need to . . . you know, yes I need to. I'll always remember this. *If they don't express it (racism) then you can feel and that's another story, you know* . . . (my emphasis)

Although Li was ten years my senior, I was a stranger he could safely confide in. As a fellow foreigner and a person of color, he assumed that I would understand precisely what he was talking about. And I did. "Feeling racism" as Li put it, was another concept that I could relate to very well as a minority person. It is part of the reason why it is sometimes impossible to offer cogent proof of its manifestation. Like a thick cloud, it envelops space even where no blatant act of racism has occurred. Many students of color described this phenomenon to me.

Standpoint theorists would argue that as a Black person I am more likely to understand everyday racism than say, a White-American would. This is because I am equipped with knowledge of both my own context and that of the dominant group — so as to survive in their society. Uma Narayan (1990) analyzes and critiques standpoint theory by arguing that this so-called "epistemic advantage" is a double-edged sword. She points out that while people living under various forms of oppression may be more likely to have a critical perspective on their situation than the dominant group, there is a down side to the "double vision." In my case, the negative side of the epistemic advantage presented itself at two levels. First, the experience of "turning the lens on the photographer" in this research placed a heavy toll on my personal life. As the study progressed, I developed a heightened sense of racism which was conflated with a deep sense of resentment, degradation and marginality.

At another level, the down side of my epistemic advantage meant that I could not always carry out a perfect "dialectical synthesis" of the subject matter at hand. While my status brought insight and opened some doors, it may have closed others. There are various ways that my subjective perspective could have influenced the collection of data. For example, my interpretation of the behavior of three students of color — Musa (African-American male), Yoko (Asian female), and Lisa (African-American female) — who regularly broke the norm by exclusively hanging out with White students, may have been due to my peculiar biases. I analyzed their behavior thus:

> The obvious explanation for this is that these minority students desperately need to identify with the dominant, privileged group. That is their way of dealing with the discrimination that they face in their daily lives. By constantly keeping the company of Whites (regardless of how patronizing the relationship may be), they create a gulf between themselves and their oppressed lot, thus creating a false sense of being different from them.

Despite the fact that I based my conclusions on my observations of who the dominant party was in the relationships of all three cases, the explanation that I purport to be "obvious" may indeed be inaccurate. Subjectivity of this nature is present in all research. Another example of the limitations of my epistemic advantage arises from the exclusiveness of my focus. By focusing on one social space, I could not see other spaces. There exist more social and political locations within the University (e.g., the public interest research group) where students of color and White students work together on particular issues.

As a Woman/Feminist/Graduate Student

My female identity and the fact that I was relatively well-educated weaved their way into my research study in more ways than we. It was quite apparent, for instance, that most White students interacting with me often made a big deal out of my "combined status set." Somehow, they perceived me as being exotic, and therefore "different" from African-Americans. In their perception I did not quite fit their stereotypical image of American Blacks; that is, ignorant, lazy, happy-go-lucky, aggressive and dangerous. But the very act of treating me differently was racist in itself.

Sometimes, I was even threatening to White students. For example, one day a White student telephoned and told me that a mutual acquaintance had given her my name and that she needed my assistance. She wanted some information on the legal status of women in Uganda in order to write a Carnegie-funded report on the subject. We arranged to meet at my field site for an interview. After the greetings and introductions, Linda informed me that she had already read some of my published work on the women of Uganda. Then she told me that she was a second year law student and for that reason, I should not explain any legal principles to her! In my analysis notes I wrote:

> Linda's warning was uncalled for. She was laying the ground rules before our conversation started; making it crystal clear that I (a Black person) may be more knowledgeable about the topic we were going to discuss, but I should not assume that she (a White person) is ignorant about the law.

Although it is possible that Linda's words were well-meaning, reflecting her consciousness about the limited time available for the interview, I thought that she appeared insecure in her status relative to mine. My conclusion was based on the hedging tone in her voice plus the constant shaking of one leg under the table. Two reasons led me to racialize Linda's defensiveness: first, was the condescending way she asked, while handing me a copy of a document that is a staple part of any feminist's library worth the name, "Are you familiar with the U.N. Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW)?"; second, the way that Linda related to me was very much like a White anthropologist to a "native" rather than an "expert." Later when I inquired whether she had ever been to Uganda, Linda replied with averted eyes: "No, but I have been to South Korea.[16] I prepared the CEDAW report on that country two years ago." The audacity that made Linda imply that her foreign experience in South Korea was enough to qualify her as an "expert" on any other foreign country further deepened my suspicions.

The feminist in me surfaced on several occasions during the research process, and broadened my understanding of everyday racism. I was able to grasp, for example, the way racism interacts with another structure of dominance, namely, sexism. Below is an excerpt from my notes to illustrate this point:

> The way most African men interact with me (a woman from Africa) smacks of paternalism and chauvinism. Toko (from Mozambique), Semu (from Tanzania), and Ali (from Ethiopia), all treat me with condescension — like I was their subordinate. At times they think that merely because I am a fellow African, they have license enough to flirt with me . . . . In this society where they are made to feel so powerless, I provide an easy target for patronizing and for expressing the power that is derived from their "maleness."

I had met all these men at the field site and in their eyes I was powerless and non-threatening because of my gender. Not even the golden band on my wedding finger posed a constraint to their flirtatious behavior.

In one interview with an African-American man whose pseudonym was Musa, I asked whether he had personally confronted blatant acts of racism at the University of Minnesota. Although he had earlier acknowledged the fact that "racism is everywhere," he answered:

> No. Well, it wouldn't really be a very practical thing to be directly racist to me because, um . . . well, I'm kinda large (smiles) and not that many people are that stupid. If you're gonna be racist then you'll be racist where it's safe. You know . . . *like on a girl or something like that* (my emphasis). There's not a lot of people that are looking to get hurt, so no.

Here, Musa's sexism crept in. Although he was a lanky man, he talked "macho" with me, thus emphasizing my femininity and his masculinity in a bid to impress me. I had observed Musa's deference toward White students for weeks at the site and therefore was not very impressed with the "macho" veneer that he presented. His acts of deference ranged from yielding his seat to White students, to serving them with food and cutlery, to avoiding other minority students and deliberately seeking out only White ones. I asked Musa why he went out of his way to "help" White students and not Blacks and he attributed it to numbers. He explained that there were too many Whites and too few Blacks at the University of Minnesota: "If I have trouble interacting with three Blacks, that's like 70% of the Blacks that I am seeing that week." I analyzed this as a "lame excuse" because not once during my observations did I see Musa attempt to interact with the three hypothetical Blacks that he refers to. Had I based my research exclusively on interviews without doing the observations perhaps I would have been persuaded by Musa's argument. However, having seen him on so many occasions going out of his way to seek out White students and avoiding Black ones, I did not attach much weight to his words. Moreover, all this contributed to my construction of knowledge. I quote from my analysis notes:

> Whereas I don't condone Musa's behavior (and I still think that his way of relating to White students is inexcusable), I think that his behavior is his unique way of dealing with the racism and oppression that he's subjected to as a Black man in this society — undignified as it may be. Musa has no pride in his Blackness. His way of gaining a sense of belonging is by appending himself to dominant Whites.

Out of the fifteen informants interviewed, I found that the eight women (regardless of race) were more willing to divulge information about their personal lives than the men. In spite of my probing questions, White men divulged the least. Nancy Henley (1977) cites many studies that have found that subordinates in general are more self-revealing than dominants (also see Gilligan 1982; Chodorow 1978). She explains further that for most women it is because they have been socialized to display their emotions, their thoughts and ideas; that by giving out information about themselves, especially in the context of inequality, they give others power over them. The researcher/informant relationship is one of inequality and this could have contributed to the women's candor. However, our shared gender status worked to tip the scales toward equilibrium.

The balancing of power inequities was even more apparent with female informants who share other attributes with me in addition to gender. An example of this was my conversation with Santa, a Jamaican student who one day occupied the free table next to mine. Although we were not previously acquainted, she immediately struck up a personal conversation. Santa's candor may be attributable to her comfort in talking to a person with whom she shared three statuses — gender, race and foreigner. She talked to me about her private life and how much she hated life at the University of Minnesota. She thought that White people were "as cold as their weather." When I asked her to elaborate, she said, "I don't know what it is, but compared to the exuberance of Africans, Americans seem so apathetic." Although Santa did not know it, I was translating her every word into useful data. Her metaphoric description of Whites' behavior (especially toward Blacks) was her unique way of explaining their racism. She did not articulate it in words, but our shared commonalties gave me access to her intended meaning. As a woman, I generally found that engaging other women in talk about racism flowed naturally. Women of color in particular adopted relaxed postures early in the interview process. Carla, a Puerto Rican woman, for instance, kicked off her shoes as soon as she entered the department lounge where the interview was to be conducted. She tucked her legs under her body and told me how pleased she was to get the opportunity of talking to a person of color about racism at the University of Minnesota. She had lived in the United States all her life and she shared a lot with me, educating me a great deal in the process. She felt extremely alienated and perceived neither the United States nor her native country as home.

> . . .the homelessness! In the United States . . . well, I'm here, I work; you know . . . I survive. I do what's necessary but I know where I stand and what I have to deal with. The only place where I can *really* belong is in my own spirit because there is no *tierra* . . . there is no land in which I could really say that I am home.

I felt a deep sense of empathy for Carla but at the same time, one part of me was hot with excitement. Here was an informant who was explicitly articulating what many minority students had been trying to convey. Talking with Carla felt more like a conversation than an interview. Although she spoke about very emotional issues, there was a lot of laughter too. Compared to Kelly, who had stared with awe at the recorder, Carla seemed totally oblivious to the tape recorder which was sitting on the table between us.

As another woman of color, she saw me as she knew herself, and this had a significant effect on the ambiance of the whole interview session.

Moreover, Carla's ability to comfortably relate to me allowed her to address issues of race with greater depth than many of the other interviewees. In describing the so-called subtle racism in the midwestern part of the United States, she said:

> I think that there's a culture here that is passive-aggressive, that prides itself in not having conflict, in not dealing with conflict . . . I think [that] in the north-east there's a lot more confrontation. People will get out on a table, will do a hell lot of yelling until something gets resolved or someone gets satisfied. Now, sometimes it might not be the side you're on, and also sometimes it means that other strategies are devised . . . .

Elsewhere, she explained:

> . . . You're looking at a situation where you are the people in power and you're the privileged . . . . Certainly in this country it is very clear who has privilege and who doesn't. And the whole structure kind of allows that to take place.

Carla's analysis seems to be more "sociological" when contrasted with that of David (a White male), whose analysis was at best superficial.[17] A flustered David attempted to explain the racial segregation at the University of Minnesota thus:

> I think that the larger the number, the greater the chance of inter-racial interaction. You see if you have a hundred Whites and one Black there's only so many interactions that time and space allow, than if you have, you know . . . fifty Whites and fifty Blacks; there's a much greater chance of coming in contact with someone outside your group then.

David's focus on numbers and glossing over the problem of power, domination, and racism must have arisen from the guard that he had to put on for a foreign Black female interviewer. His formal and stiff posture throughout the course of the interview and his constant avoidance of eye-contact with me led me to believe that at least unconsciously he was aware of power dynamics posed by his race and gender in relation to mine.

CONCLUSION

This ethnographic study enabled me to gain useful insights and a theoretical understanding of how race influences the interactional behavior of students at the University of Minnesota. Race indeed holds a salient position in the day-to-day life of students and shapes their behavioral interactions. This particular approach raised my consciousness to the meaning of different patterns of how students "do racism."[18] It also helped me to put meaning to racist behavior and to prejudicial actions plus all their correlates such as frustration, alienation, rigidity, conservatism, and status concern.

Everyday racism can be conceptualized as "doing racism" in the sense that it constitutes routine, recurrent, and systematic practices. It is operationalized through the agency of racist individuals and their relation with others. In other words, the myth of racial inequality is actualized on a daily basis by individuals who "do" racism in familiar and repetitive enactments. Thus, the structural dimension of racism is integrated with its interactional dimension; as in the case of gender, these two dimensions reproduce and reinforce each other.

I have also attempted to demonstrate the way the "self" is crucial to the construction of knowledge by highlighting some influential roles in my field study on collegiate racism at an American university. Even though for the purpose of analysis I separated the Black/Foreigner and Woman Feminist/Student selves, these roles were intricately linked throughout the study. It was almost impossible for me to negotiate these multiple roles in developing fieldwork relationships and the nature of data collected.

Even the most sophisticated of statistical programs devised to analyze social phenomena would remain blind to the different ways the researcher's various roles and idiosyncrasies influenced their results. It is only through the individual researcher's self-reflexivity and self-analysis that such blinders can be removed. Although this is especially relevant to field research, it is not irrelevant to survey research and other variable-oriented methods. Susan Krieger (1991: 55) tells us: "If the social scientific task is to model the world faithfully, there is a need for strategies of interpretation that challenge blinders of conventional thinking." As social researchers, we owe it to ourselves and to the reading public to bring such issues to the fore. Talking about the self should not be threatening to the old orthodoxies.

This analysis has provided insight into the experiences of American everyday racism through the eyes of a Black foreigner. The self-analysis has been a valuable eye-opener in building upon my personal understanding of the research problem. My best tools of resilience to the pain and anger that came with conducting this project were largely found in the achieved self-confidence and pride I possessed before coming to the U.S. My daily grappling with everyday racism in this country was a profound education in the ignorance of its perpetrators and the authentic dignity of the self. Hence, this study has demonstrated in more ways than one that it is possible and useful to turn the lens on the seemingly omnipotent photographer.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This article would never have seen the light of day without the tremendous inspiration and solid encouragement provided by Jennifer Pierce. Amy Kaler gave the invaluable and necessary focus while the contributions of my colleagues in the Feminist Theory and Methods seminar at the University of Minnesota plus the three anonymous reviewers helped in elucidating a number of hitches in the flow of the arguments. My partner in struggle and in life, Joe Oloka-Onyango was always there to bail me out of my mental knots and binds.

ENDNOTES

1. The author is on the Faculty of Law, Makerere University (Uganda) and presently a Ph.D. candidate at the University of Minnesota's department of Sociology and Center for Advanced Feminist Studies. Her most recent article is "'The Personal is Political' or Why Women's Rights are Indeed Human Rights: An African Perspective on International Feminism" *Human Rights Quarterly* (1995) 17(4), 691-731.
2. For examples of writings by third world diasporic women about the United States see Lâm (1994), Abu-Lughod (1991), Mohanty (1988), Lazreg (1988), and Spivak (1987).
3. In his classic exposition, *Man's Most Dangerous Myth: The Fallacy of Race,* Ashley Montagu showed that "the many differences which are alleged to exist between 'races' do not in fact exist or that those which do exist are of no significance from the standpoint of social action . . ." (1974, p. x).
4. For example, the same individual who is identified as being "Black" in the United States may be categorized as "White" in Brazil (Marger 1985; Harris 1964). Indeed, as noted by Harris, "One of the most striking consequences of the Brazilian system of racial identification is that parents and children and even brothers and sisters are frequently accepted as representatives of quite opposite racial types" (1964:57). Indians, plus other non-Whites in apartheid South Africa were officially identified as Black or "kaffirs."
5. One example of an unscientific justification for the inferiority of some races was that based on racist theological interpretations of the old Testament such as "The Curse of Ham" (Genesis 9:25). For a detailed discussion of these theories see Tilson (1958) and Leach (1988).
6. The term "racialism" as used here draws from the meaning used by Omi and Winant (1986) which signifies the extension of racial meaning to a previously racially unclassified relationship, social practice or group. Thus, racialization is perceived as an ideological process, an historically specific one.
7. For Herrnstein and Murray, "race" represents a unity of physical, mental, personality, and cultural traits which determines the behavior of the individuals inheriting this alleged unity.
8. This work was translated into English and published in the United States in 1915 as *The Inequality of Human Races.*
9. Although Darwin's evolution theory, based on the doctrine of "survival of the fittest" was exclusively extrapolated from studies on plants and animals, social Darwinists such as Herbert Spencer and Ernst Haeckel drew from his insights to extend its applications to human beings.
10. As already stated this paper focuses on how I came to construct patterns not the patterns themselves. However, I observed the following patterns of interaction overall: (i) A high degree of segregation among students based on racial lines; (ii) the paler the tone of one's skin the higher the likelihood of such person mingling with White students; (iii) Most Whites I talked to were not aware of any racism at the University or else they argued that if it existed it was "very subtle"; (iv) Students of color were acutely conscious of the racism around them.
11. The dominance of browns and grays in the room gave one the feeling of low energy and neutrality — as if nothing exciting was supposed to happen in this setting.
12. The majority of Africans living on the continent have no idea of the extent that racism affects people of color in first world democracies like the U.S. Indeed, many Africans only associate racism with the historical accounts of slavery and the more recent apartheid regime in South Africa.

13. One interesting observation from this study was that most students from the dominant groups believe that the more subtle the manifestations of racism are, the less debilitating its effect. However, speaking as someone on the receiving end, I know that racism is racism — subtle, blatant, inward or outward; its blow is not affected by these qualifiers.
14. The term "Minnesota Nice" refers generally to that formal politeness often exhibited by Minnesota natives in social interaction. Some people argue that it is their way of maintaining social distance.
15. This included both Asian-Americans and Asians from the southeast of the Asian continent.
16. South Korea is not the real South Asian country on which Linda reported. This has been disguised for purposes of anonymity.
17. Indeed, I found that minority students, more so than White students, tended to perceive racism on a structural basis. One possible interpretation of this is that such a sociological approach justifies collective rather than individual action to deal with racism. Another possible explanation is that by analyzing racism in a structural manner, minorities rationalize it as something that they as individuals can do nothing about and this serves as a kind of buffer against its debilitating effects.
18. Cf. "Doing Gender," in West and Zimmerman (1987).

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