

University of South Australia

The Library
www.library.unisa.edu.au

Educating Professionals, Creating and Applying Knowledge, Engaging our Communities

This is an Author's Accepted Manuscript of an article published in *Practice*, online, no. , pp. 1-19, copyright 2016, Taylor & Francis, available online at: http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/09503153.2016.1250876

CPRA 1250876
21 October 2016
Initial
CE: QA:
Coll: QC:

PRACTICE: SOCIAL WORK IN ACTION, 2016

A 'turn to language' as a Response to the Shifting Contours of Racist Discourse

Shepard Masocha

Racist discourse has significantly shifted away from the use of overt racial language and has predominantly become a coded and subtle discourse. This article highlights how paying attention the ways in which language is used in its social and cognitive contexts can provide social work with a more robust response to the shifting parameters of racist discourse. It illustrates how using a strand of discourse analysis called discursive psychology can result in an enhanced understanding of the ways in which exclusionary sentiments are couched in contemporary discourses. Drawing on data from a minority of social workers who participated in a wider study that explored the experiences of social workers who were working with asylum seekers in a UK local authority, the article highlights the ways in which exclusionary views can be articulated and legitimated by drawing on culture, instead of race, as a marker of difference. It is suggested that a turn to language can result in significant enhancements to current antiracist frameworks.

Keywords: language use; anti-racism; discourse; racism; culture; asylum seekers; critical social work

Introduction

The quest to understand the contemporary ways in which race and racism shape the lived experiences of black and minority ethnic groups is characterised by intense academic debates. For example, on the one hand, Goldberg (2002), Bonilla-Silva (2013), Winant (2000, 2015) and Omi and Winant (2015) argue that the state and politics play a crucial role in the production, reproduction and persistence of race and racism. On the other hand, Wimmer (2014, 2015) argues against that the acceptance of the primacy of the state and politics as axiomatic truths and emphasises on the role played by social boundaries such as ethnicity. Within social work there is a renewed interest in the topics of race, racism and in particular anti-racist practice (Bhatti-Sinclair 2011; Singh 2013, 2014). Anti-racist perspectives have provided significant insights into the structural and institutional sources of disadvantage (Dominelli

PROOF ONLY

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group

© 2016 British Association of Social Workers
http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09503153.2016.1250876

1988). They are characterised by a commitment to the 'dismantling of institutionalised practices of racism, whether in education, in employment, housing, immigration policy, and so on, as well as a direct confrontation with racist ideologies' (Rattansi 1992, 29). Anti-racist perspectives have resulted in the emergence of black perspectives within social work as well as a much better understanding of the experiences and impact of racism on black people (Keating 2000). However, in spite of these insights and contributions from anti-racist perspectives, current social work theory does not fully reflect 'the *fast-shifting "politics"* of race and racism in Britain and Europe' (Lavalette and Penketh 2014, 13; emphasis added).

This article argues that paying attention to language use has potential to provide social work with a more robust response to these shifting parameters of racist discourse. It illustrates how using discourse analysis can result in an enhanced understanding of the ways in which exclusionary sentiments are couched in contemporary discourses. Drawing on data from a minority of social workers who participated in a wider study (Author's own 2012) that explored the experiences of social workers who were working with asylum seekers in a UK local authority, the article highlights the ways in which exclusionary views can be articulated and legitimated by drawing on culture, instead of race, as a marker of difference. It is suggested that a turn to language can result in significant enhancements to current anti-racist frameworks.

Shifting Parameters of Racism

Social work largely draws on out-dated views and narrow historical definitions of racism that are largely based on skin colour and biological categorisation (Author's own 2015) yet the late twentieth century saw the emergence of 'new' racism (Barker 1981). Largely, blatant expressions of racism have been replaced (but not eliminated) by the 'new' racism also known as modern racism (McConahay 1986), or symbolic racism (Kinder and Sears 1981). A defining characteristic of the 'new' racism is that it is so subtle that it is very difficult to identify, and often takes place without the use of overt derogatory racist language associated with the traditional forms of racism. Instead, a *coded discourse* has emerged that can be understood through semantic and pragmatic cues to its target audiences (Reisigl and Wodak 2001). Given the coded nature of contemporary racist discourses, social work's continued reliance on outdated analytic frameworks means that there is a risk that the profession could be silenced in a context where racist discourses are being articulated without reference to terms that emphasise black/white, inferior/superior, primitive/advanced racial binaries. As Lavalette and Penketh (2014, 13) note, racist sentiments are predominantly being articulated with reference to 'creed and culture … nationality and citizenship—concepts that do not neatly correspond to older ideas of race concerned with biology and skin colour'. Given the significant changes in the ways in which racist

PROOF ONLY

CPRA 1250876
21 October 2016
Initial
CE: QA:
Coll: QC:

sentiments are couched and the high level of subtleties that are characteristic of contemporary racist discourse, it is important that social work develops an interest in understanding the specific ways in which contemporary racist discourses are constructed.

The shifting parameters of racist discourse present a significant challenge to the anti-racist social work project because it has become particularly difficult to identify and substantiate accusations of racism in a context where race and racial categories are no longer predominantly and explicitly drawn on as markers of difference. Barker's (1981) seminal work illustrated how in Britain culture was being presented as a natural difference and how it was being used in arguments against immigration which highlighted the need to protect the British 'way of life' that was presented as being threatened by the increasing presence of immigrants. Similarly, in their analysis of analysis of the ways Pakeha (White New Zealanders) talked about Maoris, Wetherell and Potter (1992) noted that social relationships were no longer being discussed in racial terms. Instead, culture was being drawn on in exclusionary views to perform the same functions traditionally performed by race. They found that culture was being constructed as a naturally occurring and indisputable difference between people. This linguistic strategy gave rise to the culture-as-natural-difference-discourse in which Maoris were constituted as the Other and inferior on the basis of their cultural practices, attitudes and values, as well as a threat to the dominant New Zealand white culture (Every and Augoustinos 2007). The overall effect of using the culture-as-a-natural-difference discourse was that it legitimated and naturalised the oppression and exclusion of Maoris (Wetherell and Potter 1992). Within Australia, discursive research studies (Mares 2002; Every and Augoustinos 2007) have also documented how arguments for tougher measures against asylum seekers have been justified on the grounds of the need to protect the Australian 'culture' which is portrayed as threatened by asylum seekers' cultures.

Racism is an ideology that is enacted through social practices and serves to establish and maintain unequal power relations. Ideology can be understood as shared beliefs or social representations that are used to accomplish social practices. Barker and Galasinki (2001, 66) define ideologies as 'discourses which give meaning to material objects and social practices, they define and produce the acceptable and intelligible ways of understanding the world while excluding other ways of reasoning as unintelligible'. It is important that social work develops an understanding of how language mediates racist ideologies. Racism is formulated, articulated, reproduced and reinforced through discourse. As Foucault (1972) notes, language is the primary vehicle through which an ideology is transmitted, enacted and reproduced. As such, paying closer attention to the ways in which language is deployed within racist discourses can lead to better understanding of contemporary racism. This will involve a focus on the ways in which such the discourses are constructed, their linguistic structures, the linguistic strategies deployed and their effects.

PROOF ONLY

A turn to language

Within social work research and education, the crucial role that communication plays in the accomplishment of social work tasks is widely acknowledged. Communication skills are widely accepted as essential for effective social work practice (Coulshed and Orme 2012). As 'an indispensable precondition for good social work' (Hall et al. 2014, 1), the development of core communication skills, both verbal and non-verbal, is seen as key to the realisation of social work goals.

The term language is used within this article to include all forms of written and spoken communication (Hall, Slembrouck, and Sarangi 2006). Written texts, spoken discourse and various forms of non-verbal communication have played crucial roles in the historical construction of social work practices, and they continue to contribute to the reproduction and reshaping of these practices (Gunnarsson, Linell, and Nordberg 1997). Social workers spend a lot of their time talking with service users and other professionals. Invariably these discursive acts are closely intertwined with, preceded and followed by writing practices leading to the production of reports, emails, contracts, etc. As Hall, Slembrouck, and Sarangi (2006, 10) argues,

> These mundane activities of daily professional life are not merely insignificant processes which merely operationalise, facilitate or frustrate evidence-based practice or critical reflection. On the contrary, the objectives of social work can only be realised through such mundane activities and these practices do not just have an influence on social work, *they constitute it*, they bring it into existence. (emphasis added)

In spite of the centrality of language in the accomplishment of practice activities and in constituting social work itself, research that pays particular attention to the role of language is relatively new within social work. It is only in the last two decades that there has been a growing interest in the performativity of language and its implications within various social work contexts. The emerging body of discursive research illuminates the role of language in enacting sociocultural perspectives and social identities within social work. This emerging research also highlights the specific ways in which service users, who are the targets of social work interventions, are discursively constructed. For instance, Hall et al. (2003, 11) draw attention to the 'mechanisms and processes which create clienthoods'. Juhila's (2004) study explores the ways in which the deployment of categories deriving from dominant culturally defined discourses impact negatively on the ways in which shelters and their residents are constructed resulting in stigmatised identities. A considerable amount of the emerging discursive research focuses on practice with social work with children and their families. This research highlights how language is deployed within child protection contexts and the effects of such linguistic strategies. For instance, Hood (2014) uses critical discourse analysis to explore the ways in which social work practitioners from different agencies involved in

AQ3

PROOF ONLY

CPRA 1250876
21 October 2016
Initial
CE: QA:
Coll: QC:

delivering services for children and young people in a London metropolitan borough talked about the complexity of their work. Hall and Slembrouck (2011) explore the ways in which categories were used by social workers in the construction of the presenting levels of risk and to determine if a child could be classified as Child in Need, or a child in need of protection with each classification invoking specific institutional practices. Firkins and Candlin (2011, 81) illustrate how within statutory child protection contexts 'a discourse of deficit is consequential to the framing of risk in child neglect situations'. This emerging body of research has resulted in the development of a perspective that focuses on 'not only *what* is said, but *how* it is said, and the interaction between the two' (Hall et al. 2014, 3; emphasis in original) within social work contexts.

However, the role that language plays in the articulation of racist sentiments in relation to asylum seekers have remained largely unexplored within social work research. However, outside the realm of social work, there is an increasing body of discursive research on race, immigration and asylum seekers. For instance, van Dijk (2004) has researched extensively on the new racism in relation to immigration and asylum seekers and also illustrated how these trends in the Netherlands are also replicated in other countries including the United Kingdom. In their analysis of Austrian political discourse, Krzyzanowski and Wodak (2009, 3) note that the right wing political parties have 'refined their electoral programmes under the rubric of national populist slogans and adopted more subtle forms of racism'. Effectively these parties have moved away from overt neo-fascist discourses. Thus, the exclusionary tendencies of their discourses are no longer articulated in overt racial terms, which, for instance, refer explicitly to biological or racial categories. Instead, social characteristics are deployed primarily as discursive resources that distinguish citizens from the undesirable immigrants who are depicted as 'not wanting to work', 'a drain on public resources' and 'not wanting to integrate'. Other parts of the developed Western world have also seen the growth of similar research including Australia (Pickering 2001; Lueck, Due, and Augoustinos 2015) and Belgium (Blommaert 2005). The UK has also witnessed the growth of discursive research, which seeks to examine this new racism (Billig et al. 1988; Fekete 2014). This extensive body of discursive research evinces the characteristics of a racist discourse as rhetorically organised to deny, rationalise and excuse the marginalisation and exclusion of migrant out-groups that are depicted as outsiders, the Other. By focusing on the linguistic resources used in the construction of asylum seekers, this body of research illustrates the high levels of subtlety that are characteristic of the 'new' racism. The research highlights how the construction of asylum seekers successfully articulates exclusionary and oppressive views without drawing on overt racist language. These studies share a consensus that in terms of its effects, the new racism is not different from the 'old fashioned' racism because it justifies and legitimates inequalities as well as exclusionary tendencies. As such, there is an imperative for social work to be aware and conversant in these aspects of new racism. Clearly, the

PROOF ONLY

CPRA 1250876
21 October 2016
Initial
CE: QA:
Coll: QC:

shifting parameters of racist discourse present significant challenges to social work both at theoretical and practice levels. As Singh (2014, 30) cogently argues,

> … the continued ascendancy of racism, both old and new, demands a more expansive anti-racist project. It must be a project that is capable of recognising how 'race' far from being consigned to the dustbin of ideological history, has re-emerged in new virulent forms that are no longer reliant on skin colour or other such external biological features for the demonization of 'the other'.

As part of the project that seeks to enhance current anti-racist frameworks, this paper argues that a turn to language can enhance such an understanding.

The Method

The article highlights the ways in which discursive psychology (Wetherell 2015) can be used as a prism for understanding the specific ways in which racism subtly undergirds negative representations of asylum seekers in selected narratives from a minority of the social workers who participated in the wider study (Author's own 2012). Interview data were collected from 25 social workers who were working with asylum seeking service users within a Scottish local authority in children and families, child protection, adult services and hospital-based teams. The interviewees ranged from newly qualified, experienced social workers, senior practitioners, team managers and two service managers. Ethics approval was granted before approaching the local authority for its permission for social workers to participate in the study. Formal requests were made through the local authority for practitioners willing to participate in the research and their informed consent was acquired prior to the interviews. In the information pack provided to participants, the objectives of the research and its focus on how linguistic resources are deployed in the construction of asylum seekers were explained. At the beginning of each interview the objectives of the study were reiterated, in particular how the study was primarily concerned with specific ways in which meanings are produced in discourses. It was also explained to the participants that, their responses would lead up to the study of 'how people, through discursive practice, create constructions of the world, groups and identities' (Phillips and Hardy 2002, 119). Thus, the study focused on the performativity of discourse as a 'potent, action oriented medium, not a transparent information channel' (Potter and Wetherell 1987, 160).

During the interviews, practitioners were encouraged to talk about their views on asylum seeking, the roles of media and politicians in constituting knowledge about asylum seekers, individual practice experiences with asylum seekers, existing service provisions, perceived barriers and ways of enhancing practice. Semi-structured interviews were used because they enabled participants to construct accounts of their own practice that are not restricted by a

PROOF ONLY

CPRA 1250876
21 October 2016
Initial
CE: QA:
Coll: QC:

premeditated framework. The interviews were audio taped and transcribed. The social workers' accounts were randomly coded Social Worker 1–25 to ensure anonymity of participants. The interviews were treated as conversational encounters rather than simply research instruments that can reveal objectively a set of beliefs or opinions. As such, in transcribing the recorded interviews the researcher's questions were considered as equally important as the respondent's answers. The researcher's questions were seen as setting the functional contexts for the respondents' answers and were included in the final transcript as it was acknowledged that 'the linguistic nuance of the question is as important as the linguistic nuance of the answers' (Potter and Wetherell 1987, 165).

It is also important to acknowledge important ethnographic issues, which were relevant to this research and might have had an impact on participants' responses. The researcher is black and comes originally from one of the countries with significant numbers of asylum seekers present in the United Kingdom. This is particularly significant given that all the respondents except one were white. As such, the researcher's biography could have had an impact on the types of responses received as it is possible that the respondents could have provided different answers, for instance, if the interviewer was white. Hunter (2005, 152) discusses difficulties that can be experienced when conducting research in health and social care settings and notes that 'such research potentially provokes anxiety for participants, particularly if they are members of the dominant social group within racialised and gendered social relations'. Although these ethnographic issues might to some extent have had an impact on the responses in interviews, the methodology of discourse analysis used for this study does not seek to uncover a pre-existing 'reality' or 'truth' about the ways in which asylum seekers are constructed. Instead, the focus is on how the selected narratives provided in the interviews are put together, worked up and legitimated.

As the primary interest of the study was how linguistic resources are deployed in the construction of asylum seekers, a full transcription of all words spoken including hesitations was undertaken. In order to ensure authenticity and quality of the data collected through interviews, the transcripts were shared with the respondents with a view to correcting any errors in transcription. The interviews were transcribed and coded using Nvivo. The initial coding of data enabled the identification of discursive themes that recurred across and within accounts. This was achieved through noting patterns in the data such as recurring words, phrases, metaphors and arguments. These themes were subjected to further rigorous analysis, which focused specifically on *how* asylum seekers were constructed in practitioners' narratives, the *purpose* and *function* of such constructs.

PROOF ONLY

Data Analysis

The data analysis revealed a number of interpretative repertoires that were used by social workers when talking about asylum seekers. Interpretative repertoires are 'recurrently used terms for characterising and evaluating actions, events and other phenomena' (Potter and Wetherell 1987, 149). Interpretative repertoires do not just constitute particular versions of the world (Potter and Wetherell 1987) but are also performative as they result in specific acts such as blaming, justifying, rationalising, as well as constructing specific identities for the speakers (Every and Augoustinos 2007). The interpretative repertoires were identified through closely reading and re-reading the interview data a number of times until as Edley (2001, 198–199) suggests

> … one begins to feel as though you've heard it all before. People seem to be taking similar lines or making the arguments as others previously interviewed … Gradually one begins to recognise patterns across different people's talk, particular images, metaphors and figures of speech.

The majority of the 25 social workers who participated in the study were sympathetic towards asylum seekers. They strongly rejected the negative views of asylum seekers projected in the dominant anti-asylum seeking discourses. As such, the majority of the respondents provided a counter narrative to the negative portrayal of asylum seekers in media and politicians' discourses (see Author's own, 2015 for detailed discussion of each of these interpretative repertoires).

This article focuses on one interpretative repertoire in which a minority of participants drew on culture as a marker of difference. Within their narratives, the social workers were able to take up a minority respondent view and articulated negative views of asylum seekers drawing on notions of culture. The use of discursive psychology enabled an understanding of how and with what effects such exclusionary sentiments were positioned within the highly constrained and regulated ideological context of social work. It is important to note that 'the professional and institutional contexts within which social workers are located make it very difficult for practitioners to blatantly express what might be perceived as oppressive, discriminatory, exclusionary, racist or prejudiced views' (Author's own 2015). As such the negative representations of asylum seekers were carefully formulated and presented as reasoned arguments, which inoculated the speaker from potential accusations of being prejudiced. The paper illustrates how an attention to language use can enable an understanding of the sense-making processes behind such formulations and the ideological functions that such representations serve in reproducing and legitimating inequalities (Author's own 2015a).

Culture as a Marker of Difference

This section analyses extracts from social workers' narratives in which culture was explicitly and implicitly drawn on as a linguistic resource in order to

PROOF ONLY

construct asylum seekers negatively. Within these narratives, notions of culture were deployed in ways that resulted in negative representations of asylum seekers. For instance, when asked about some of the challenges encountered when working with asylum seekers, Social Worker 25 noted that one of the main challenges was getting them to engage with the service. He accounted for these difficulties in terms of asylum seekers' cultural backgrounds and previous experiences of dealing with government departments:

Extract 1

> The cultures of these people make them reticent. It's a big thing for them to approach a local authority. In their culture it's a big thing for them to ask for help. They also don't ask for help from what they term as government agencies. The only government agencies from their experiences are agencies of control, of power and discipline. (Social Worker 25)

The deployment of notions of culture in this extract accomplished important rhetorical work. Asylum seekers' cultures and previous experiences dealing with autocratic regimes were depicted as impediments to effective practice. Implicit within this narrative was also a defence of social work practice as the nature and levels of service provisions for asylum seekers were brought under the spotlight. There is potential here for the social worker's competence to be to be called into question over the inability to engage effectively with a particularly vulnerable service user group. In such circumstances, '… a satisfactory form of "error accounting" is essential. More specifically what is at stake is how to account for possible failure…' (Sneijder and te Molder 2005, 666—667) without showing social work as complicit in the marginalisation or maltreatment of asylum seekers. Social Worker 25 achieved this through the attribution of blame to asylum seekers' cultures. The narrative was rhetorically organised and oriented to rebut potential criticisms of practice and Social Worker 25 was able to provide a persuasive account of a competent social work practice. The strategy in this form of 'error accounting' (Potter and Wetherell 1987) involved the attribution of blame to others for these shortcomings. It was a linguistic move that was deployed to deflect criticism from the respondent's individual practice. The formulation was set in a context that portrayed the social worker's practice as competent but severely constrained by exogenous factors, in particular the actions of others whose cultures and previous negative experiences of dealing with authorities made it difficult for the social worker to do his work, as he would otherwise have wanted.

More importantly, in the above narrative, the social worker deployed the term culture as a signifier of difference as asylum seekers were constituted as 'cultural Others' (van Dijk 2004). The term culture functioned in this narrative to differentiate asylum seekers from mainstream service user groups. The effect of deploying culture as a linguistic resource within this narrative was that asylum seekers were constructed as Outsiders. This was underscored

PROOF ONLY

through references to asylum seekers as *these people* and *them*. Therefore, this narrative is exclusionary in the manner in which it constructs and positions asylum seekers as outsiders — the cultural Others. In similar ways, research studies within Dutch mental health services have found also that immigrant service users tend to be identified and treated as outsiders on the basis of their cultures, and that they are seen as an anomaly that does not fit into the available systems of classifications (Haar 2007).

Furthermore, there was also an expectation that asylum seekers should assimilate into the dominant — 'modern' white middle class — culture, and that social work's role as was primarily to empower asylum seekers to do so. For instance, Social Worker 12 observed in relation to unaccompanied asylum seeking children that,

Extract 2

> … we can't recreate their home and cultural environments, where everybody speaks their language and where schools speak their language. Unfortunately, English is something they will have to have a grasp if they are really to succeed and to work out what is really going on for them. (Social Worker 12)

As such, he recommended that what was needed were 'better English classes, more intensive English' (Social Worker, 12) for this social group to integrate into mainstream society and the dominant culture. Such assimilationist notions have recently found expression in government policies such as the £20 million language fund announced by the British Government in January 2016 to 'help' Muslim women to learn English (Elliott and Fisher 2016). The acquisition of English language skills by Muslim women is seen as central in tackling 'backward attitudes', enabling integration in the community and countering Islamic extremism. In both contexts acquisition of English language is explicitly being linked to successful settlement. It is important to note that the English language is being deployed in this discourse to perform a crucial role in identity marking and demarcating boundaries between the in-groups and out-groups (Hogan-Brun, Mar-Molinero, and Stevenson 2009).

The need to observe British norms and integrate to the British 'way of life' was emphasised in the following narratives in which asylum seekers' cultures were presented as problematic and an impediment to integration:

Extract 3

> … I think there are aspects where at times people perhaps should realise that they are now in Britain and there are things perhaps that may not be acceptable in their country, but are unfortunately the ways we do things here; and that can be hard if you come across it. Some of my colleagues here one day had to run out to the back because there was an Asian family beating up a fourteen year old boy and they said that was ok in their culture, but to us that is completely not acceptable in our country. (Social Worker 4)

PROOF ONLY

CPRA 1250876
21 October 2016
Initial
CE: QA:
Coll: QC:

Extract 4

> I think for the young people I work with, the largest issue, after they've got their basic needs met in terms of housing, food and shelter, is just that they're in a really different place. Um, working with the sort of Muslim youth from different parts of Africa, it's a hugely confusing place to be around, you know, seeing women who are virtually undressed in their eyes. I had to do with one boy from Somalia what was acceptable and not acceptable and why people dressed the way they did to keep himself safe and also other people in public safe because he basically thought everybody was up for it and basically looking for sex and that it was because people were basically showing their shoulders and legs and as far as he was concerned they were all available. It was about trying to say to him that this was a different place, and he was also placed initially in a home that was in the centre of [the city's] gay triangle. (Social Worker 12)

It is important to highlight the ways in which notions of culture were deployed as linguistic resources in these two extracts in order to present the asylum seeking family and the young person in a negative light. The use of specific cultural, ethnic and religious markers in both extracts is noteworthy. Social Worker 4 and Social Worker 12 strategically deployed the categories of 'Asian', 'Africa', 'Somalia' and 'Islam' as cultural, ethnic and religious markers. These markers signify how different these asylum seekers' norms were from the British standards. These differences were cemented by the implicit and explicit deployment of the *us/them* binary in the accounts, which effectively positioned the asylum seekers as cultural Others. Invoking the discourse of nation and nationhood through phrases like 'different place', 'our country' and 'their country' were significant linguistic strategies, which emphasised the extent to which the asylum seekers did not belong and were the outsiders. For instance, this spatial illocutionary effect was further reinforced by Social Worker 4's insistence that this is the way '*we* do things *here*' (emphasis added). Central to the linguistic strategies was the use of culture as a relational and 'referencial demarcator measuring the distance these Others stand in relation to the Caucasian mainstream' (Park 2005, 21). Through vivid lexicalisation and 'telling the case' (Pithouse and Atkinson 1988) in both narratives the asylum seekers' cultures were presented as deviant and in direct conflict with British norms. Such representations contrast sharply with other respondents' narratives which provide more positive constructs in which, for example, asylum seekers' cultures were not depicted as in direct conflict with host country's culture(s). Instead asylum seekers' cultures were portrayed in a positive light and seen as having the potential to enrich the community and as such should be welcomed as an opportunity to increase cultural diversity within the Scottish city:

Extract 5

> We need to have a mixture. I mean, having lived in London I noticed when I came to [this city] how white the population appeared having been used to such a mixed population. I think it's changing and I think it's good from kind of

PROOF ONLY

CPRA 1250876
21 October 2016
Initial
CE: QA:
Coll: QC:

> racial attitudes if you like. There is a lot of ways people can give; it's not about money. (Social Worker 5)

Social Worker 5's view counters claims by politicians and media which construct asylum seekers' cultures as posing a threat to community relations, racial harmony, even national security and the British way of life (Capdevila and Callaghan 2008).

Discussion

Within the selected narratives, the respondents ascribed essentialised cultural identities to asylum seekers. This view of cultural identity differs significantly from the poststructuralist view of cultural identity as a highly unstable construct that is in a state of flux. For instance, Hall (1989, 71) views cultural identity as not having a 'fixed origin to which we can make some final and absolute return … it is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative, and myth. Cultural identities are the points of identification, which are made within the discourses of history and culture. Not an essence but positioning'. However, within the selected narratives, the social workers assigned to asylum seekers fixed cultural identities. This had the effect of constructing asylum seekers as Outsiders who do not belong to the UK. As Gilroy (2005) argues cultural essentialism is a key component of contemporary racist discourse. As such, an understanding of contemporary racism requires an appreciation of the ways in which notions of culture are deployed in discourse. As Hall (1996, 4) argues,

> … because identities are constructed within, not outside, discourse, we need to understand them as produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies. Moreover, they emerge within the play of specific modalities of power, and thus are more the product of *marking of difference and exclusion*, than are the sign of an identical, naturally constituted unity—an identity in its traditional meaning (that is, an all-inclusive sameness, seamless, without internal differentiation). (emphasis added)

As the social workers' narratives illustrate, asylum seekers' were depicted as deviant on the basis of their culture. It is therefore important that social work develops a critical understanding of the ways in which power is exercised in the deployment of notions of culture as signifiers of difference. As Laclau (1990) argues, the constitution of a social identity in itself is an act of power. Thus, the acts of ascribing cultural identities, which were undertaken by the social workers in their narratives of asylum seekers, can never be taken as benign acts. In this sense, the deployment of notions of culture within the given narratives cannot be conceptualised in neutral terms as simple references to asylum seekers' integrated patterns of human behaviour, values, symbols, interpretations and perspectives, which distinguish them from other

PROOF ONLY

CPRA 1250876
21 October 2016
Initial
CE: QA:
Coll: QC:

social groups (Banks, Banks, and McGee 1989). Instead power is exercised with significant exclusionary effects in the very act of ascribing those cultural identities. The ways in which culture was drawn on the social workers' narratives as a linguistic resource was implicated in power relations (Sakamoto 2007). The ways in which culture was drawn on in the presented narratives were not benign but ideologically patterned as it reflected vested interests and served specific purposes. The overall effect of the ways in which culture was utilised by the social workers was that it resulted in the Othering and marginalisation of asylum seekers without the use of racialised language. Therefore, focusing on how power is exercised in discourse enables an understanding of the ways in which cultural Others are constituted (Pon 2009).

The question of who is exercising power and ascribing meanings is equally important. The presented narratives raise important issues regarding the role of Whiteness within contemporary racist discourses. Whiteness is the 'default standard' (Sue 2006, 15) against which all other racial minorities are compared, judged and made visible. Whiteness can be understood as the invisible norm against which all other racial groups are evaluated (Delgado and Stefanic 1997). As the social workers narratives suggest, it is on the basis of this standard that asylum seekers were evaluated and treated as falling short of the British white middle-class standards. Therefore, this paper sheds light the crucial role that Whiteness plays in the constitution of asylum seekers' identities, representations and subjectivities (Moreton-Robinson 2004, vii). Within the given narratives, asylum seekers were constructed through white British middle-class lens and judged as deficient, inferior and deviant. They were constructed and presented as embodying difference, which contrasted sharply with the dominant white culture that was represented as neutral and normal. As Addy (2008, 11) argues, 'the assumption that whiteness is the norm creates an automatic classification of "otherness" and confers a sense of racial dominance and superiority'. It can be seen here that Whiteness provides a privileged subject position upon which the dominant white racial group can define and evaluate themselves and the racial Others (Frankenberg 1993). A key feature of contemporary racist discourse is how it provides one culture with the power, authority and right to define what is normal (Consedine and Consedine 2005) with negative exclusionary consequences for social groups like asylum seekers that are classified as abnormal.

Implications for practice

A 'turn to language' has potential to result in significant anti-racist practice enhancements. For example, it may enhance practitioners' sensitivity to their own discursive practices and potentially result in practitioners developing alertness to the consequences of their use of language (Hall, Slembrouck, and Sarangi 2006). Developing practitioners' understanding of the performativity of language may enhance their abilities to unpack the complexities, which

PROOF ONLY

underpin exclusionary discourses. This can be achieved through redeveloping current anti-racist frameworks so that they take into account the crucial role that language plays in contemporary racism. Drawing on Latour's (2007) notion of 'recalling' as a framework for critically reflecting on modernity, Hage (2016, 125) argues that,

> … if we were to compare racism and anti-racism as products, we can say that across history racism has been far more successfully 'recalled' and made operationally suitable for a variety of socioeconomic and cultural environments. It has morphed and shown a capacity to target a variety of people, sometimes at the same time: blacks, Asians, Arabs, Jews, Roma, and Muslims … Comparatively speaking, anti-racism has been conceptually rather ossified and is always playing catch up with the racists' fluid modes of classification.

Therefore, there is an imperative for current reflexive praxis frameworks used for anti-racist social work practice to be 'recalled' and reconfigured in order to respond more effectively to the ever-shifting parameters of racist discourses. Reconfigured anti-racist frameworks might enable practitioners to adopt a more critical gaze over the ever-shifting parameters of contemporary racist discourse as they will be able to *decode* the 'new racism' resulting in the rejection of common sense and reasoned explanations which tend of blame black and minority ethnic groups for their marginalisation. Significantly, such enhanced frameworks and understandings have potential to help practitioners to avoid being complicit in the deployment of problematic discourses to articulate what are largely complexities and challenges of working in a diverse world.

From an advocacy standpoint, the turn to language might result in the profession avoiding being silenced by the 'new' racist discourse, which no longer uses racialised language. As the selected narratives illustrate, culture is deployed to articulate exclusionary views and serves as 'an anthropologising stamp imprinted on the Other in the same way that biological racism racialises the Other' (Ahmed 2015, 3–4). The turn to language has potential to enable social workers to be more vocal and active in political and policy debates, which could have fundamental implications for those who are the targets of social work interventions. Engaging with discourses and logics of race and racism at this level is in itself a political act that can potentially lead to a transformative social work practice. Through participating in such discursive acts and debates at different levels, social work has potential to challenge and change race relations, and realise social justice for the marginalised racial and cultural groups.

Therefore, the 'turn to language' has potential to result in real gains for anti-racist practice. It has potential to lead to the development of a more *critical anti-racist model*, one that fully foregrounds the specific ways and conditions under which race and racism emerge. Such a critical anti-racist model could enable practitioners to better understand, navigate and respond to the challenges that culturally and racially diverse practice contexts present. A

PROOF ONLY

CPRA 1250876
21 October 2016
Initial
CE: QA:
Coll: QC:

'turn to language' could result in the development of a critical understanding of the processes that continue to shape, legitimate and naturalise inequalities in contemporary society. Such a critical perspective can enhance practitioners' capabilities in unearthing, recognising, naming, exposing and effectively challenging racism in its various manifestations.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is important that practitioners that are conversant in the ways in which language is used in the construction of subjectivities as well as a critical understanding of the ways in which language mediates practice. This imperative can hardly be overemphasised given the centrality of language and discourse within social work itself. This could also go a long way towards the development of a culturally sensitive social work practice. Significantly, this could also contribute towards the development of enhanced anti-racist frameworks that are not reliant on race and biological categorisation, but focus on the ways in which discourses of exclusion are constituted and articulated through paying particular attention to language use. Such an addition to the current anti-racist frameworks could be significant in the quest to sufficiently respond to the ever-shifting parameters of exclusionary discourses.

Although this paper has primarily focused on the race and racism, how these factors intersect with other forms of oppression is still an important consideration in understanding social work practice with oppressed racialised groups in its wider contexts. Ideologies relating to race, religion, nationality, ethnicity, caste, dis/ability, gender, class, etc., interact in complex and dynamic ways to produce and reproduce oppression. However, although this intersectionality should be explicitly acknowledged, as is the case in the anti-oppressive practice frameworks, this should not result in the watering down of the centrality of race and racism in the lived experiences of racialised groups. Racism is an enduring 'fundamental cause' for racial inequalities (Ray and Seamster 2016). Thus, there is a risk in setting aside the racial specificities that relate to some marginalised groups such as asylum seeker in favour of a more general analysis. Razack and Jeffery (2002, 263) cogently argue against such an approaching noting that, 'The act of comparing other oppressions to race or trying to balance the "airtime" given to each category denies the saliency of racialized relations'. As such the omnipresence of race and racism in the lives of racialised groups such as asylum seekers provides sufficient justification for the focus afforded in this paper.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

PROOF ONLY