Mobilizing race and racism: visible race and invisible racism

Rahul Sambaraju*¹, Chris McVittie²

¹ School of Law, Trinity College, University of Dublin, Ireland.
² Division of Psychology, Sociology, & Education, Queen Margaret University, United Kingdom.

*Corresponding author information: Dr Rahul Sambaraju. TRiSS. School of Law. Trinity College Dublin, College Green. D02 PN40. Ireland (sambarar@tcd.ie).

Abstract:
N/A

Keywords:
Race; racism; anti-racism; Black Lives Matter

Data availability statement:
INSERT STATEMENT HERE
Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study

Acknowledgements:
A Special Section such as this brings together the efforts of several persons. We would like to thank the editors for their full support and guidance in developing this special section in the pandemic. We are also thankful to the contributors for their excellent contributions and working with us on this special section. We are particularly thankful to reviewers for their intellectual contributions in shaping the papers and the special section.
Visible race and invisible racism

Mobilizing race and racism: visible race and invisible racism

Social psychological research into racism has, to date, concerned itself mainly with racism as a form of prejudice. Different approaches to the study of racism have thus originated in understandings and theorizing of prejudice more generally. A particular focus of such work has been the apparent decline, within contemporary society, of instances of what might readily be recognized or treated as prejudice in public settings, and the explanation for this decline in, or absence of, explicit prejudice. Recent events, however, especially in the United States and United Kingdom, but also elsewhere, have been marked by overt concerns with racism. These events, public debate, and counterarguments, all suggest that concerns with race and racism have become more manifest in present society. It is this context that provides the background for this special section.

The papers in this special section include studies that offer a social psychological examination of contemporary engagement with race and racism. The studies here examine and interrogate the social psychological significance of race and racism in settings and contexts where these are not merely salient but are explicit. While it is hard to make claims about whether occurrences of racism have increased or forms of racism have changed in recent times, it is certainly the case that race and racism are more visibly part of our social lives (Burke, 2017).

Events such as the police killings of Black persons in the United States of America, have been ongoing for a long period in various forms (Ward, 2018). However, the recent shootings of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, among others, resulted in the rekindling of a global movement to tackle racism across countries and contexts (BlackLivesMatter, 2020; Chugtai, 2020). Outside of policing, areas like sports, academia, and public spaces are increasingly subject to scrutiny for
Visible race and invisible racism

how race and racism are dealt with in these settings. There have been growing calls for the removal of statues of controversial historical figures implicated in potentially racist activities (Treisman, 2021), there are increasing calls for acknowledging the role of race in various sports (Ali, 2020; Rainford-Brent, 2021), and in academia there is an institutional recognition of racism (Subbaraman, 2020). Irrespective of the reasons for the prominence of race and racism, it is the case that contemporary social life in the ‘Western’ world has to contend with race and racism, and the implications of this for our behaviours.

Social psychological work on race and racism has traversed the full range of socio-political contexts that people find themselves in. Researchers from various approaches and methodologies continue to be keenly concerned with various aspects of race and racism. Throughout the history of social psychological work, approaches have not only reflected prevalent theories but also ongoing societal concerns. For instance, the work of Allport (1954) and the subsequent approaches of ‘subtle prejudice’ were developed in the context of the post-Jim Crow era (Pettigrew, 1989). Similarly, social identity theory, and its application to prejudice, arose in the aftermath of Nazism and the Second World War (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

Research using discourse-based approaches has engaged with concerns over the increasing invisibility of race in public contexts, as racial inequities have continued in more recent times (Augoustinos & Every, 2007a, 2007b; Billig 1988; Wetherell & Potter, 1992). More recent research has increasingly engaged with the production and management of anti-migrant prejudice (Goodman & Burke, 2010; Sambaraju & McVittie, 2017). Substantial findings from these various approaches attest to the successful engagement of social psychology with a wide range of concerns. These findings however have sought primarily to examine interpersonal and societal practices that suppress the appearance and significance of race and racism in our public life. They have not,
Visible race and invisible racism

therefore, sought to consider potential increases in the manifestation of race and racism, as currently seen in public spaces in relation to inequities and inequalities. Increasing references to race and racism as related to societal inequities and inequalities therefore require a thorough examination to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the role and mobilization of these phenomena in contemporary life.

To date much social psychological theorizing and empirical examination has identified a range of practices that contribute to suppression or erasure of prejudice and racism. Researchers note that in post-civil rights era contexts racist expression in public settings was problematic and race and racism became ‘taboo’ terms that are usually avoided (Feagin & Vera, 1995; Pettigrew, 1989). Social cognition researchers argue that rather than a disappearance of racist attitudes a set of newer, indirect, and subtler form of racist attitudes was avowed, characterized by support for egalitarian values while harbouring unconscious racist beliefs (Dovidio, Gaertner, & Pearson, 2017). One such construct, ‘aversive racism’, refers to individuals’ aversion to their own racist beliefs and interracial situations (Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986). Constructs such as ‘subtle prejudice’ were developed specifically to examine the claimed decrease in ‘blatant’ prejudice (Pettigrew & Meertens, 1995). Similarly, ‘symbolic racism’ was developed as a construct to distinguish this from other more overt forms of prejudice (Sears, 1988). Other research approaches have also examined the public suppression of racism.

Researchers from a social representations perspective show that practices that might be termed racist are made invisible through treating racism as no longer prevalent (Andreouli, Greenland, & Howarth, 2015). Social psychologists from a discourse analytic perspective point to the routine denials of racism (Augoustinos & Every, 2007a; Goodman, 2014) where possibly racist actions are explained away or justified via other means. Researchers examining the more micro
Visible race and invisible racism

interactional practices show that the use of race categories is an accountable practice, if only because it might implicate the racial category of the speakers themselves (Whitehead, 2009). For this and other consequences, social psychologists suggest that race and racism are routinely avoided in interactions, with this avoidance being referred to as ‘race trouble’ (Durrheim, et al., 2011). Common across these studies is the attempt to understand and examine how something as important as race and racism are barely acknowledged in a wider range of contexts. Studies that show exceptions to these practices have examined either noticeably extreme groups (Billig, 2001, Burke & Goodman, 2012) or responses to specific events (McVittie, Munro, McKinlay, 2019). The general picture, then, is one in which issues of race and racism are rendered relatively invisible.

One outstanding social psychological explanation for the avoidance of what, potentially at least, might be treated as racist rests on a widely shared understanding of prejudice, which is that being prejudiced indicates irrationality. Billig (1988) and Wetherell and Potter (1992) specifically argue that there is a pervasive expectation that human beings are expected to act in rational ways. Prejudice thereby comes to be viewed as accountable in that it reflects pre-judgment, behaviour that does not arise on a rational basis. Widely identified as the ‘norm against prejudice’, researchers argue that this ‘norm’ does not necessarily regulate behaviour as much as it offers a yardstick by which our behaviour can be judged or justified. For instance, this might mean that practices that may lead to discrimination are reworked into seemingly rational activities. Recent research shows that seemingly explicit admissions of racism still take place despite the apparent norm against prejudice (Xenitidou & Sapountzis, 2018).

Other researchers identify similar phenomena where racial inequities and inequalities continue to flourish without acknowledgement of race or racism. Bonilla-Silva (2003) refers to the
Visible race and invisible racism

set of ideologies and discourses that suppress or deny racism and consequently allow for racial inequalities as ‘Color-Blind Racism’. Others have used the term ‘New racism’ to refer to the broad swathe of phenomena where race and racial differences are transposed from biological to cultural features in justifying inequities (Barker, 1981; Omi & Winant, 1986; however, see Leach, 2005). These traditions of research have all addressed, in one way or another, the multiplicity of social practices and actions that do not treat race and racism as central to various aspects of social life, despite the continuation of racial inequities and inequalities.

Against this backdrop, current contexts pose an interesting set of questions for social psychologists, which centre on a concern with the foregrounding of race and racism themselves. In contrast to research approaches that focused on the absence of race and racism from public life, current social psychological research must address the foregrounding of race and racism as related to inequities and inequalities.

In the present context, there is a notable acknowledgement that race and racism shape our social lives in fundamental ways. These are increasingly mobilized to various ends such as to start movements for social justice, to ascribe racial identities to make claims about racism, and to attribute culpability for violence. This is not to say that these attempts are always fruitful; efforts to initiate anti-racist policies by making race central to public life are met with counter responses based in efforts to suppress the relevance of race, such as the All Lives Matter movement. For social psychologists, then, the present context is marked by increased engagement with race and racism in the form of treating these as consequential for inequities and inequalities. The research articles in this Special Section provide an empirical examination of the various ways in which individuals engage with making explicit race and/or racism in our social lives.
Visible race and invisible racism

Broadly, the four research articles constituting this special section speak to concerns with bringing up race and to resistance to mobilizing race. In contrast to previous research, these studies take issues of race and explicit debates on racism as a primary focus and, in so doing, mark a turn in focus for social psychological research on race.

Resistance to mobilizing race

Two papers here deal with the opposition or resistance to recent mobilizations targeting racism. In both cases, researchers examine social psychological features involved in resistance. Notably, findings in both cases point to constructing the mobilizations either as unnecessary or not targeting racism.

West et al. (2021) examine the support for the All Lives Matter (ALM) among White individuals that presented itself in opposition to the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. The authors note that ALM present themselves as more inclusive than BLM because of their colour-blind position, given that BLM makes race explicit. West et al. (2021) test the role of implicit or explicit racism, colour-blindness, definitional boundaries of discrimination, collective narcissism, and political affiliation. Using techniques of statistical regression, they show that support for ALM is predicted by 3 sets of variables: implicit anti-Black racism, endorsing colour-blind ideologies that downplayed racial inequalities, and narrow definitions of racism implying that racism is ascribed only in exceptional cases. For West et al. (2021) this set of findings means that implicit anti-Black racism and downplaying the extent of anti-Black racism contribute to support for ALM, rather than any inclusive position. Further, it becomes easier for White individuals to justify support for ALM without expressly disagreeing with the cause of BLM: support for ALM can instead be recast as in line with the status quo, which does not treat racism as a pressing concern. Here then resistance to mobilizing race involved rejecting the relevance of racism.
Visible race and invisible racism

Similar issues are at play in resisting nascent anti-racist policies in Sweden. Wikström and Hübinette (2021) examine the argumentative practices underlying opposition to the introduction of collecting race/ethnicity data in Sweden. The Swedish context is captured by what the authors refer to as *colour-blind antiracialism*, which means that ‘Swedish official and mainstream attitudes to issues of race and racism represent a combination of antiracialism and colour-blindness’ (pp. x). The Swedish context is unique as the concept of race is officially abolished with an avowed aim to ‘go beyond’ race or other biographical markers, which is attributed to a ‘left-liberal’ ideology that aimed to address racism. Current calls for recording racial information from Swedish residents is then resisted in ways that contrast much of earlier research that shows the pervasive denials and suppression of race and racism. Wikström and Hübinette (2021) argue that resisting these anti-racist policies involves moral dilemmas for participants, which are managed through presenting themselves as progressive and rational and contrasting this with proponents of newer policies that would involve recording racial data of Swedish residents. The authors particularly point to the relevance of the Swedish context for the absence of denials and disclaimers in favour of imposing colour-blind antiracialism. For participants making race an explicit part of official and public life in Sweden meant bringing to fore the racism in Swedish society. As in West et al.’s (2021) paper, resistance to making race a more relevant part of social life involved contending with implications of racism.

The above articles demonstrate how attempts to make race explicit as a means of achieving racial justice are undermined. In the data reported, antiracism was treated as a desirable practice, without however adopting means that would make race explicit. Rather, alternative means that did not make race relevant were proposed in the form of ALM or colour-blind antiracialism.
Visible race and invisible racism

Mobilizing race

The two papers here are concerned with examining how ‘race’ as an identity marker is mobilized and the consequences of doing so. In both cases, the papers offer a close examination of how in mobilizing race individuals orient to the ways in which this may be received by others. The analyses show that participants’ mobilizations of race happen in the backdrop of shared orientations and understandings of racism and antiracism.

Xie et al. (2021) examine discursive practices where racial identities are the source of trouble. The authors examine interactions where narrations of *racial misrecognition*, that is, instances where racial minority members are seen as non-nationals because of their race, are treated as racism by targets themselves and other recipients. Selecting instances where misrecognition is narrated to others in online and in-person settings in the United Kingdom, their analysis focuses on how these descriptions involve category work that demonstrates that the targets were excluded from membership in the national category. The targets’ racial group membership becomes the reason for their exclusion from the national category. This is treated as misrecognition and oriented to as racism by the target and recipients of this narration. For the authors, misrecognition is a significant issue for experiences of racism not only for its express exclusion, but also because it manages issues and concerns over complaining about racism. Previous research shows that making accusations of racism is a complicated task that dissuades routine targets/victims (Augoustinos & Every, 2007b). However, treating misrecognition as an exclusionary act allows recipients to participate in recognizing and accepting or rejecting such accusations, possibly because the recipients of such complaints are likely to be co-members in the broader national group. Thus, a failure to treat misrecognition as devaluing the targets’ national group membership might further contribute to exclusion. For participants then race was mobilized in relation to national categories in making claims about racism.
Visible race and invisible racism

Shrikant and Sambaraju (2021) examine the use of racial categorizations in news announcements involving police killings of Black persons. In the ongoing context of increased attention to police violence on Black persons, racial categorization in announcing such events takes on distinct meanings. Shrikant and Sambaraju use membership categorization analysis to examine shared meanings of using racial categorizations alongside categorizations of other actors (police) in mainstream broadcast American news media. As news announcements, the descriptions made by presenters come with limitations as to what can or cannot be said. The findings show that race categories acquire specific meanings when used in conjunction with other categories, such as the attribution of culpability to those involved. This is achieved through using various categorizations of, on the one hand those who were shot, such as a ‘Black man’, ‘Black father’, ‘an unarmed Black man’ and so on, and on the other hand, of those who did the shooting, such as ‘a police officer’, ‘a former police officer’, ‘a White police officer’ and so on. Their analysis points to the routinization of descriptions that include the racial membership of the person shot, in juxtaposition to the institutional membership of the shooter as indicating culpability of the shooter. This turns on commonly associated knowledge about police personnel and their activities and that of ‘Black persons’. The absence of any other reason leaves no explanation for the shooting and indicates the possibility of racism. Shrikant and Sambaraju (2021) suggest that this is all the more likely given the increasing awareness that Black persons in the United States are routine targets of police violence. Race and racial categorization then are used to imply institutionalized racial violence.

The above two papers point to the significance of bringing up racial identification. In both cases, discursive practices through which race-related information is conveyed to the overhearing audience take into account the possible reception of racial identification in terms of indicating
Visible race and invisible racism

racist actions. Audiences and speakers orient to implications of making racism explicit as problematic. Their practices then made race explicit alongside other categories to implicate racism.

Building on, and in contrast to, previous work that points to suppression (Barker, 1981), avoidance (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000), or denials of racism (Augoustinos & Every, 2007a), the present set of papers examine the significance of making race and racism explicit in our social lives. The first two papers examine how bringing up race as a notable aspect of our social lives can be resisted for its implication that the present societal arrangements are racist. The last two papers examine how race was brought-up to indicate the potential relevance of racism for events so that recipients may take-up that inference. These papers demonstrate that while race is made explicit to describe events and possibly implicate racism in these events, bringing up race in this way involves overcoming constraints. Specifically, these constraints involve relating issues of race to those of racism: participants used national or other institutional identities alongside racial identifications to overcome such problems. Using race as a means of acknowledging inequities was rejected in favour of alternative means to address racial issues.

Together the papers suggest that for participants here the use of race implicated shared understandings of racism, where explicit claims about the latter are seemingly more problematic. In other words, while race may be made explicit, one must contend with the consequently immediate implications of racism. Treating racism as a feature of our societies implicates racial majority group members in inequities and inequalities. Resistance to bringing up racism can buttress these implications, however making explicit race alone might not implicate inequities and inequalities in our societies. The papers here show that mobilizations of race, and resistance to those mobilizations, both addressed concerns with making racism visible.
Conclusion – visible race and invisible racism

The present papers form an initial thrust at examining what making race explicit in our interactions accomplishes in a range of settings. In line with contemporary social psychological research that emphasizes the dynamics of our social life, the present papers examine the relevance of making race and racism explicit. Making race explicit in the form of Black Lives Matter, collecting race data, or using racial identification and/or categorization readily brings-up an engagement with racism. At the same time, this means acknowledging that racism organizes much of our social lives, which may raise various levels of discomfort for individuals. Participants in the data reported in these papers were engaged in dealing with this dilemma. The visibility of race alongside the invisibility of racism is a dilemma that all of us continue to deal with. Social psychologists can further examine how our changing orientations and understandings of race and racism help us deal with this dilemma.
Visible race and invisible racism

References


Visible race and invisible racism


McVittie, C, McKinlay, A. & Munro, R. (2020) “A Golly was simply a toy. End of”: Inoculation, attention deflection, and attempted puzzle-resolution in contesting racism in online
Visible race and invisible racism

https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2640


Visible race and invisible racism


Visible race and invisible racism
