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Performing Blackness: Disrupting 'race' in the classroom

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Performing Blackness: Disrupting 'race' in the classroom

Abstract: This paper looks at the experience and performance of 'race' in the classroom, based on the narrative of a young Somali man; Ahmed. The paper explores the notion of blackness and primarily draws on Fanon's (1967) work on the 'doubled' self, Althusser's (1971) 'interpellation', and makes some reference to Judith Butler's (1990) work on 'subjection', to examine the function of racial performativity in the classroom. The paper examines the role of White privilege in the construction of imposed 'Blackness' in the classroom, and through an analysis of Ahmed's narrative, disrupts the racialized discourses of the classroom.

Keywords: Blackness, Interpellation, Performativity, Classroom, Narrative, Fanon

"It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others..." **W.E.B. Du Bois**



“I don’t want them to see me, I don’t want to be different”

Ahmed [16 year old, Research participant

The image:

This image is one of three images produced by Ahmed - a young Somali man who participated in the research project that forms the basis of this paper. It tells two stories, or as Ahmed states “shows two- sides” of himself. The image on the left is a caricature of Ahmed in his ‘everyday’ clothing and represents his racial and national identity. The image on the right is a caricature of Ahmed in his religious/ cultural clothing and represents a religious and cultural identity. For the purpose of this article, I will only be focussing on the image on the left (for a fuller analysis, see(Abdi, forthcoming).

Introduction:

This paper examines the themes that emerged from reflective conversations with Ahmed in which this image acted as a basis. The arguments presented in this paper are not intended to present a collective identity or experience. The discussion points are reflections from snapshots of an individual’s lived experience. A lived experience that is located in a specific time and space.

It is also important to note that although the terms ‘Black’ and ‘White’ are used within this paper, they are done so with an appreciation of their complexity and ambiguity(Hall, 2000). White

privilege is also made reference to in this paper but is not based on an essentialising consideration of binary racialized identities. Nor is it intended to suggest that all White people accrue privilege equally. Whiteness does not mean 'White people'. Whiteness is a racial discourse that is constantly in the process of construction and 'White' people are the socially constructed group that are for the most part the beneficiaries of such privilege (McLaren, 1997).

The paper explores how 'Blackness' is shaped and performed within a classroom context, and how embodied and experienced identities of difference are presented and negotiated by Ahmed. As the data is part of a larger narrative piece, quotes from the reflective conversations with Ahmed will be used throughout to contextualise the themes being discussed. These themes are examined through an interdisciplinary contextual framework, which draws on Fanon's *Phenomenology of Race* (1967, 2004), Butler's *Subjection and performativity* (1990, 1997) and Althusser's *Interpellation* (1971). I will further outline these theories as the paper progresses.

Context of the study

Ahmed is sixteen years old and one of four research participants in an ESRC funded study designed to look at the identity-related experiences of young Somali men through the use of narratives. As part of the research, the young men were asked to represent their everyday experiences of belonging through various self-representing modes, and these constructed artefacts provided the basis for in-depth narrative based conversations. These conversations as well as the artefacts were analysed using a postcolonial conceptual framework and presented as individual case studies.

The research was participatory by design and each stage of the research process was informed by discussion and collaborative decision making between myself as the researcher and the participants. As a Muslim Somali woman, and as a youth worker who works in the community centre that the young men attend, I have a vested interest in both the research topic and the participants themselves. I note here that throughout the paper I use the collective pronouns of 'us', 'we' and 'our' to identify myself with the peoples in question, and this is a clear marker of my positionality. My positionality has no doubt influenced my interpretation of the artefacts and the co-construction of the narratives. It is not my intention to present this work as objective, and I understand that as an interpretive piece of research the data presented in this paper may be interpreted differently by readers.

Within a narrative approach, research questions are generated from experience rather than being informed by theory (Trahar, 2011). Therefore, the research questions and sub-questions are based on the outcomes of the research rather than acting as initial guides to structure the research. The three questions that emerged from the research outcomes encapsulated the complexity and multiplicity of the research. I have therefore refrained from presenting the questions in bullet point form in order to resist presenting the research as ‘neat’ and ‘linear’.

The initial question which emerged was to seek to understand how the young men represented or experienced their identities and how they felt these identities were represented by others. The second question sought to explore how the young men negotiate or challenge their identities in different spaces. This allowed a particular focus on how identities are presented or performed within the home, school setting and wider community/ society. The final question to then to consider how the young men used verbal and non- verbal language to construct, reconstruct and negotiate their identities.

This paper will explore some of these questions in relation to the artefact presented by Ahmed and will draw primary on the work of Fanon to conceptualise some of the interpretations being made.

From Somali to ‘Black’: Interpellated Blackness

Ahmed was not born in the UK, but left Somalia as a child and arrived in the UK with his mother and siblings. Though his family still have strong ties to their Somali identity, having been raised in the UK, Ahmed has conflicting feelings towards both his Somali and British identities.

The social structure of Somalia is based primarily on genealogy (tribes) and so many who come into the UK not only face a new culture and language but also an unfamiliar discourse of race. The only association Somalis have had with race prior to coming to the West was colonialism, in which those in power were Western and those that were powerless were ‘us’. Here I say ‘us’ because ‘African’ is not a marker of identity frequently used amongst Somalis but a colonial marker placed upon us and so I use the term ‘us’ to identify myself as part of the colonised Somalis. As race isn’t a marker or form of categorisation in Somali society, the recognition of the Western colonials as being

powerful did not also necessarily mean that the powerless were those that were Black, for Somalis have never had the need to define themselves as 'Black'.

"When we first came hooyo [mum] always use to think everyone we saw who was White had power [laughs]".

During our conversations, Ahmed would often make light of his mother's understanding of race- as if he had a better understanding of race than she had. Although he often joked about how much admiration his mother seemed to have towards 'White' people, he spoke with resentment when he commented on the views of his mother and elders in his community when it came to talk about those considered 'Black'.

"It's like Black is a dirty word".

Ahmed could not understand his mother's view of colonialism. He told me the stories his mother would tell him about the benevolent and charitable nature of the colonisers towards the poor and weak Somalis and this made him angry. However, the frustration Ahmed had towards his mother's view of the colonisers was similarly expressed by his mother who he states could not understand the representation of 'Blacks' here in the West and why he would want to be 'one of them'.

"She says everything bad here is associated with Black people"

Ahmed reflects as he tries to make sense of why his mother fears his association with the word Black, "I think she's scared". When asked about his own views of what it means to be 'Black' it was clear that Ahmed's views of race were greatly influenced both by the views of denial and caution held by his mother and elders in his community as well as his own experiences in which race is "just how they see me". They being White people. Both he and his mother appreciate the gendered nature of race (Ladson- Billings, 1994; Mac an Ghail, 1988; Mirza 1993) and so Ahmed recognises that the fears his mother has is not only of him adopting a 'Black' identity and in turn losing his Somali identity (she does not see the two as being mutually exclusive). Rather she fears the consequence of how others, particularly 'Whites'; who she sees as powerful, will see and judge her son based on his identification as a Black male in a society that associates Black masculinity with danger and violence (Ferguson, 2001)

Both Ahmed and his mother recognise race through representation and recognition. His mother upon entering a racialized society, sees and recognises the colonials in the Whites, but she does not see herself or her son in the Blacks or the ways Blacks are represented and so this association is more difficult for her to accept. For Ahmed however race is like a descriptor in which he is seen first and foremost as Black and so he has come to recognise all the expectations that this label holds. The ways in which these racial stereotypes are internalised and become part of Ahmed's accepted norm could be understood by drawing upon Althusser's (1971) concept of *interpellation*.

According to Althusser (1971), when subjects recognise themselves to have been 'hailed' or placed in categories by ideology, the individuals find themselves interpellated. This process of interpellation takes place through social institutions such as schools or by the police, in which people are 'hailed' and placed in categories in order to enforce particular ways of acting and thinking about themselves as subjects. Althusser illustrates this by giving the example of a policeman shouting "hey you there!", and the person who turns in response becomes that 'you' through turning around (Althusser, 1971, p.174). A powerful contemporary example of this would be the 'stop and search' of Black men and how this perpetuates the stereotype of Black men being violent criminals (Ferguson, 2001).

This notion of interpellation builds on the work of Lacan (1948) who discusses how ideology consists of a 'symbolic order' in which we become part of an imagined reality by accepting the categories we have been 'hailed' into. In Ahmed's case, his being 'hailed' as 'Black' has never been vocal but through the stereotypes in which he feels his blackness is made visible. The clearest example of this type of interpellation is Ahmed's experience of schooling, in which racialized/gendered processes of 'Othering' are never vocalised but embedded into everyday practices that become normalised and to an extent accepted.

Being 'Black' in the classroom

"Inside of course I'm Somali at home and stuff, but outside it's hard not to be Black".

When I asked Ahmed to elaborate on what he meant by "it's hard not to be Black" he made specific reference to his schooling experience. Ahmed has been expelled from 3 schools for 'aggressive' behaviour, but he is not academically underachieving. He talks about the classroom as a 'game' in

which there are rules he must obey and expectations he must meet but also spoke of what happens when the game isn't played the way "it's supposed to be".

In schools, like most settings in which Whiteness dominates, racialized thinking and practices continue to shape the experiences and opportunities of young people (Delgado & Stefancic 2012; Gillborn 2008). When Whiteness is the default setting of the classroom culture, then race only matters when it involves those who are not White (Armstrong & Wildman, 2008). This is the case for Ahmed, who recognises this racialized space in which he is 'hailed' and expected to maintain a code of conduct, not as a member of the class but as he states, a 'Black' member of the class. By seeing himself as positioned as a member of a group, the typical characteristics of that group in turn become the expected standard for his own behaviour (Turner et al. 1987). These are the set rules for the 'game'.

Here we are not only able to reflect back to Althusser's interpellation to understand how ideologies are reified through practice, but also to refer to Butler's work on 'subjection' and 'performativity' to better grasp the notion of the 'game'. When an individual is being identified, or labelled this process becomes a part of their own subjective experiences and identity formation. For Ahmed, through processes within the classroom, through systems of classification, his blackness is brought into being and he is named. This subjection as Butler (1997) describes is to "be given over from the start to social terms that are never fully our own" (p.28).

Race- making and identification: Performing 'Blackness'

Research on racial identity recognizes that White and Black students experience their group memberships differently (Gillborn, 2008). Cultural and racial identity is typically much less salient for White students (though not necessarily all white students), unlike Black students whose racial identity is very much part of their self-concept ((Dovidio, Gaertner & Saguy, 2009) and so 'race issues' are seemingly a Black and not a White problem (Banks & Banks, 2009). In fact, an important aspect of White privilege is having the choice to ignore the ways in which race influences and structures the opportunities that people are given (Rankin & Reason, 2008). Because of the ways in which schools institutionalise race, Black and White students may have very different experiences of education (Hurtado et al, 2008).

Ahmed comments on his interactions with his peers as distinctly different than his interactions with his teachers. Race is an issue amongst his peers, however it is based on a notion of duality that is acknowledged but not discussed. By this I mean there is a racialized classroom experience in which Ahmed and his Black peers are seen and see themselves as the ‘Other’, an experience that his White peers cannot identify with but may recognise. This concept of duality, in which we find ourselves lodged between the constant labels of the ‘either’ and the ‘or’, presents as Nicotera (1999) states “the production of dichotomies in which cultural spaces are marginalised, identities are constricted and differences are devalued” (p.43).

Ahmed does not expect his White peers to understand his experience. He shares collective frustration with the other ‘Black’ boys in the class who recognise that their educational experience as well as those of their White peers are racialized. These feelings of frustration amongst Ahmed and his Black peers, which are never spoken but are understood collectively, are not unusual. Individuals experience emotional responses to situations that affect their group, because part of having an identification with that group is that it becomes part of the individual sense of self, therefore giving the group identification some emotional significance (Iyer, Leach, & Crosby 2003; Mackie, Devos, & Smith 2000). When members of the same group face similar struggles or share similar feelings it enables individuals in that group to feel connected (Brewer, 1999). However, that is not to say that group membership is a comfortable space, nor is it necessarily willingly joined, but may, as is the case for Ahmed be a space for conflicting feelings of comfort and discomfort.

Knowles (2003, p. 21), asserts that it is the interactions between people that gives rise to the materiality of race, in a process she describes as race- making. She makes a distinction between the representation of race and race as being produced through the ways individuals conduct themselves within specific social contexts (Knowles, 2003 p.49). Knowles presents race- making as both communicative and relational, involving social mechanisms such as language and interactions, as well as cultural influences (Knowles 2003; Leonardo 2011).

“She says us lot will never change”

In contrast to the interactions between Ahmed and his peers, the racialization of his interactions with his teachers are a lot more explicit and direct, and are often expressed through practices and dialogues that are normalised within the racialized culture of the classroom. Although his visible

presence in the room is an apparent statement of his identification, it is his actions that position him and other 'Black' ["us lot"] boys in the class as part of the distinct 'other'. Ahmed recognises that these responses to a great extent determine the types of interaction between him and his teacher, interactions which have through routine performance become normalised.

As we discussed notions of 'normality' and maintaining a 'routine' in the classroom Ahmed claimed "*it doesn't matter where I sit when I come in, I don't bother getting my things out, I know I'm going to be moved*". This unspoken daily interaction in which Ahmed is aware that upon entering the classroom the teacher assumes a position of behaviour management in which 'disruptive' behaviour is 'managed' by moving students to different parts of the room, appears to be of routine occurrence. He claims that his race identifies him as a 'disruptive' student and that he and his teachers are both aware that he must prepare himself for this inevitable move. Although he performs this identity, it is not fixed, but contextually and spatially embedded (Holt, 2010) and is influenced by the unspoken expectations of his teacher. He is in effect 'hailed' as Black (here meaning disruptive) by his teacher on a daily basis. In continuing to cite the conventions and ideologies demanded as a result of this 'hailing' and through the performance of moving between desks, Ahmed incorporates such expectations into his lived reality, making them appear to be natural and necessary.

'Out of place': Classroom as resistive or restrictive spaces?

In his last school, Ahmed was placed on the Special Educational Needs (SEN) register because of his behaviour. The National level statistics from Pupil Level Annual School Census (PLASC) (2002) states that the pattern of SEN and attainment in secondary schools are broadly similar and that Black, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi students present the highest number on SEN registers and the lowest level in terms of attainment. However, the suggestion that ethnic minority students are more likely to have SEN than their White peers is highly contentious and the relationship between SEN and ethnicity is complex, with the evidence inconclusive.

Ahmed states that this is not uncommon and that many of the 'Black' boys at his current school have SEN. Youdell and Armstrong (2011) state that the label of SEN, and particularly the label of Social, Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties (SEBD) is frequently applied to those young people whose behaviour is 'out of place' within the school context.

Holt (2010) defines the term socio- emotional differences as ‘differences’ that are socio-spatial and developed within continually shifting ‘norms’ of acceptable and appropriate behaviour, alongside the experienced and embodied differences of the individuals. These ‘norms’ of acceptable behaviour and embodied difference are often fundamentally interconnected. The racialized practices of the classroom embodied by Ahmed and the other ‘Black boys’ in his class are based on the internalised recognition that their identities are not only devalued socially but also within school spaces (Holt, 2010).

Therefore, if the behaviour that is implicitly expected of Ahmed and the other Black boys not only socially but as Ahmed believes also within the classroom, does not ‘fit’ the explicit, or ‘general’ codes of behaviour, then inevitably their behaviour will be considered ‘out of place’. This is evident in the constant moving around that Ahmed must do from desk to desk as insisted on by his teacher. Fanon (1967) explains this well in his notion of the ‘doubled self’ – the feeling of being in two places at once, and how Black people must wear “White masks” to get by in a White world. Fanon discussed this in reference to colonised peoples (specifically in Algeria). Ahmed and the Black boys behave in a way that they believe they are expected to behave, they wear White masks, and although they may be ‘out of place’ in the classroom, they are also ‘out of place’ socially. The White masks they wear are not representative of the performance of Whiteness in order to be ‘accepted’ but rather the performance of Blackness, in order to reflect back what Whiteness expects to see.

Although Althusser’s interpellation can be used to understand the labelling or ‘hailing’ of Ahmed when he ‘turns’, what happens when he doesn’t turn? Ahmed recognises that, even if he does not ‘act Black’, he has still been named and been categorised as Black. An example of this is Ahmed ‘acting Black’ because he does not want to be ‘seen’ by the teacher, knowing that if he doesn’t ‘act Black’ he will still be considered Black, but a Black that is hyper visible, a Black that is “different”. The distinction for Ahmed in being ‘seen’ and being ‘visible’ is that the former is an awareness that by not conforming to expectations he would be noticed by the teacher, and the latter is the awareness that once noticed by the teacher the interactions between them would ensure that he was also noticed by the entire class. He is no longer just seen by the teacher as being disruptive, but visible for all to see. Fanon explains this notion of the ‘doubled-self’ by sharing an experience, in which a White child points to Fanon and says:

‘Dirty Nigger!’ or simply ‘Look, a Negro!’.... I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects.... Sealed into that crushing object-hood....my body suddenly abraded into non-being (Fanon, 1967 p.112-113)

Here Fanon is not being ‘hailed’, he is ‘doubled’. As opposed to being ‘turned’, Fanon turns away from himself, resulting in him becoming doubled (Macherey, 2012). He is in two places at once, two spaces which are equally oppressive (Bhabha, 1994, Fanon, 2004).

This sense of being ‘doubled’ relates to Du Bois’ (1994) notion of ‘double consciousness’ in which an individual sees himself through the eyes of others and as such behaves in a way in which the other expects. Both Fanon and Du Bois have made major contributions to the phenomenology of race. However as Du Bois primarily discusses the experiences of Black people in the USA, Fanon, in looking at experiences in Colonial Africa, France and the Caribbean, spans a broader cultural context to provide what I believe is a more detailed and complex clarification of Du Bois’ notion of double consciousness. Fanon expands on this notion by looking at the trauma that occurs when the self is categorised as inferior due to an imposed racial identity. In *Black skin White masks* Fanon comments on the oppressive nature of imposed racial identities as he states “I am overdetermined from without. I am the slave, not of the idea that others have of me, but of my own appearance” (p.116).

This is the case for Ahmed and his mother, who upon entering a racially defined society, must uphold a racial identity that is imposed on them, however damaging that may be.

This racial identity is one of inferiority and subordination, and so as Ahmed is hailed, he becomes subjected to an identity through injury. This notion of ‘injurious interpellation’ as Butler (1997) states brings particular subjects into being by placing them in the field of subjectification which works to ‘fix’ their identity (Bhabha, 1994).

Throughout the reflective conversations that form the body of this research, Ahmed never identifies himself as one of the ‘Black’ boys in the class, but always uses the term ‘like’ to associate himself with the group. His similarities to the boys in this group in terms of their educational and social lived experiences gives him comfort and so he plays up to that particular group membership to feel connected (Mussweiler, Gabriel & Bodenhausen, 2000). However, he does not always play to that

group membership if it is at the cost of other values that do not fit with the expected 'norm' of that group.

Here we see the complexity of having multiple identities in which one is placed at the forefront for a given purpose until the circumstances change and demand that another identity is called upon. In Ahmed's case, Black is his primary identity in the classroom but when his cultural and religious values feel compromised in this setting, the Black identity is no longer a priority. This processes of re-layering or reconfiguring indicate not only the complexity of individual identities but also demonstrates identities as constantly being in a state of becoming (Hall, 2000)

Although Ahmed performs to what he believes is the expected behaviour of 'Black' boys (disruptive), in order to maintain 'normality', he feels guilt over the repercussions of his actions as he reflects on the warnings given to him from his mother and elders in his community about the assumed behaviour of Whites and non- Whites. When his mother spoke of colonialism she would often remind him that those in power were also the most highly educated and so in order to be like 'them' and equally as powerful, education was key. Although this is his mother's motivation, Ahmed is also aware that education and gaining knowledge is deeply rooted in his religious identity as a Muslim and so he feels guilty that although by performing Blackness in the classroom he may be visible and accepted in this setting, he is compromising the religious values he holds, as well as the expectations of his mother.

Identification has been shown to predict important academic outcomes such as grades (Osborne & Rausch, 2001) and behavioural referral. Ahmed is conflicted between his wanting to be accepted as part of a collective group, and the consequences of 'playing the part'. "I have to get good grades so I do the work, *but not in class*". Ahmed's perceives underachievement as an indicator of 'being' Black (Ogbu 1987, 2003) and so must "act white" in exchange for academic success. However, he refuses to "act white" in the classroom, for fear of isolation from his 'Black' peers and hyper visibility towards his teachers, "I don't want them to see me. I don't want to be different". By acting in the way that Ahmed believes he's expected to act, he is not seen. However if he were to 'act White' in the classroom, he would be seen as disrupting the 'position' through which he has been hailed.

This suggests that in spaces of white privilege, such as many UK schools, a black boy acting ‘white’ (here understood by Ahmed to mean doing one’s schoolwork) may be more disruptive to racialized discourse than to act Black (here understood to mean being disruptive). This hints at the ‘normalised absence and pathologised presence’ of young black people, and specifically here of young black students who are not ‘disruptive’, within spaces dominated by whiteness (Phoenix, 1997). Ahmed’s unwillingness to compromise his ‘Black’ identification in the classroom forges an oppositional identity in which he resists and strains the boundaries set by the school and his peers for him to ‘act’ Black, by maintaining academic achievement beyond the physically confined walls of the classroom.

Implications for practice

Educational psychologists (EPs), just as youth workers, and other educational professionals are in an ideal position to assist in the development of effective services for children and young people. However, with Educational Psychology practice increasingly shifting to a consultation model, EPs have very little time to explore issues in depth, only speaking briefly to teachers and quite often do not even meet the child who is seen as being the reason for intervention; and if they do it is usually only once. This is extremely problematic. Not least because as this paper suggests, Whiteness (or indeed racism) may be performed by the teacher; with or without their explicit or conscious knowledge of this and so if the EP only consults the teacher it does not allow this issue to be explored.

The lack of contact between the EP and child is also problematic as a single meeting does not allow the time that is required for the child to trust the EP and for the depth of exploration of issues such as those discussed in this paper. To use my research as an example; had I met the participants only once it is highly unlikely that they would have produced or allowed me to glimpse the richness and complexities of the issues they face. Therefore, a suggestion to EPs would be to adapt consultation models that allow more time with young people and to use creative modes of expressions in order to gain rich insight into not only the experiences of the individual but also the practices and structures within the school context that impact on that individual’s experience. The development of consultation models which emphasise time spent with young people would allow possibilities for the exploration of Blackness and Whiteness and as a result may create a landscape where EPs are able to challenge practices that may collude with the imposition of racial identities, the privileging of Whiteness and the denigration of Blackness.

Conclusion

This paper sought to present the complexity of imposed racial identities and an exploration of Blackness as a process of continuous construction, compliance, and negotiation. Ahmed's experience of race-making through his interactions with his peers and his teachers, presents the dialogical and interactive nature of race, particularly within the classroom. As a fragment of a larger narrative piece, this paper was not intended to present a 'complete picture' of Ahmed's educational experience, but to examine fragmentary moments of Ahmed's school experience.

The conceptual frameworks mentioned here, particularly Fanon's 'doubled self' (1967) and Althusser's (1971) 'interpellation', were useful for reading these fragmentary moments. They acted as lenses to understand Ahmed's experience in a way that would not individualise his behaviour as 'disruptive' but would read the context of white privilege as the milieu for the very construction of Ahmed as 'disruptive'. This analysis of Ahmed's experience in the classroom allows us to glimpse that perhaps it is the racialization of the classroom that he is disrupting and not simply disrupting the class. The paper challenges racialised discourses and those who collude with such practices.

Further research would seek to gain more insight into embodied and embedded experiences of race performativity in the classroom from both student and teacher perspectives, as well as perhaps research with EPs to understand their role in this process. For a very long time classroom interactions have only been researched by a method of observation. By adopting a narrative approach to exploring identities, it is possible to gain a deeper insight into the emotional and psychological factors that underpin these interactions.

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