Racism in a 'Colour blind' Era

From the 1960s onwards we can start to see a move towards two particular defining characteristics of racism, which are still prominent today. These are:

1. The solidification of 'post-racialism'.
2. Discussing racial difference through a narrative of 'cultural difference'.

Post-racialism is broadly the idea that racial inequalities have been overcome, and that there are no longer barriers to upward mobility facing racialised minorities. Post-racialism has become a hot topic in the sociological study of race, particularly among a group known as 'critical race theorists'. Such critical race theorists aim to uncover how racism is still manifest in societies which appear to have reached a level of racial equality.

In the UK, this supposed post-racialism was achieved by the legislative support for equal opportunities. The government passed two Race Relations Acts in 1965 and 1968, setting up two independent bodies to deal with racial discrimination: the Race Relations Board, and the Community Relations Board. These independent bodies were used to investigate racial discrimination in employment and in the workplace. Further to these two acts, in 1976 another Race Relations Act was passed, which broadened the notion of racial discrimination to also include indirect racism. Indirect racism occurs whereby policies are applied equally to all people, but actually result in discriminating members of particular groups. For example, banning employees from wearing headwear indirectly discriminates against particular individuals who wear headscarves or turbans for religious reasons.

A consequence of post-racialism is that removes support for anti-racist programmes that aim to dismantle structures of racial inequality. If racial inequality has been overcome, as post-racialism argues, then why should policy focus on this outdated problem? A good example of this in the UK is the government's current agenda in education policy. Current educational policy focuses around improving the academic achievement (in terms of GCSE results, and access to universities) of the white working-class. However, this policy overlooks evidence of racial inequality, such as that all racial minorities are underrepresented at elite universities. Sociologists have thus highlighted, as

can be seen in this example, that post-racialism is more so the 'ideology' of racial progress – it is a way of covering up the existence of racial inequality – rather than signalling the end of racism itself. This 'double standard' of post-racialism can be seen in the rejection of increasing minimum quotas for racial minorities in Britain's top 100 Financial Trade Stock Exchange (FTSE) companies. Although the implementation of minimum quotas is not always seen as the best option to increase representation (some argue that getting a position through fulfilling a quota is actually demeaning) – the UK government's rejection of such quotas was instead predicated upon the belief that 'they may not always make good decisions but there is little sign of systematic racial prejudice at the top of British business'. What the politicians did not pay due attention towards, however, was the basic fact that only 2 of the 100 Chief Executives of FTSE companies are black.

Within this context of post-racialism, racism in Britain often happens through a process by which negative attitudes and stereotypes towards racial minorities is based on their cultural differences. This is well highlighted in Margret Thatcher's comment in 1978, one year before being made Prime Minister, with regards to tensions between white Brits and coloured immigrants across the nation: 'People are really rather afraid that this country might be swamped by people with a different culture [. . .] if there is a fear that it might be swamped, people are going to react and be rather hostile to those coming in.' As can be seen in this quote, Thatcher is defending the violent racism of white Brits by claiming that they have a legitimate basis for being hostile towards racial others – namely, that they are of a different culture that challenges the norms of British-ness. It is important to note here the similarities of Thatcher's comment in comparison to Enoch Powell's quote in the previous activity, and also how it relates to David Cameron's recent comments as will be stated in the next activity on racism and Brexit.

It is also important to note how this justification of racism was not just a Conservative policy, but carried on well into the 21st century under the leadership of 'New Labour'. Although New Labour are often heralded for creating (or trying to create) a 'multicultural' state, where people of different backgrounds live happily next to one another, sociologists have criticised the idea that New Labour actually succeeded in doing so. New Labour, these critics argue, were primarily concerned with racialised minorities *assimilating* with British norms – further reproducing the idea that 'racial tensions' were caused by minorities themselves and their failure to 'become' British, rather than

being caused by the attitudes of white Brits themselves. The main way in which New Labour encouraged this assimilation was through their multiple 'community cohesion' programmes across the country – the very language of which shows their belief that diversity was such a problem that it needed to be rid-of altogether. Sociological studies, especially heralding from the works of Pierre Bourdieu, are attuned to critiquing such government programmes. Bourdieu used the concept of 'cultural capital' to show how particular cultural systems and practice are deemed as superior to others. What we can see in the 'community cohesion' programmes is that there is an underlying supposition that White British culture is superior to others, and provides the benchmark for other cultural systems to assimilate with.

It could be replied that programmes promoting cohesion do not necessarily reduce diversity. However, the issue with this line of argument is that it overlooks the context in which these community cohesion programmes were created. Post 9/11, in 2001, Muslim communities in Northern UK Cities protested against the increased amount of police surveillance they were becoming subject to, as well as their continuing economic and social inequality. The Community Cohesion programmes were implemented to battle what the UK government saw as the real root of these problems: what they termed 'self-segregation' and its resultant 'cultural differences'. Community cohesion programmes were thus directed *toward* non-white groups who were perceived as the 'abnormal' or 'deviant' group. Sociology is important for analysing the faults in this implementation, focusing upon the key concept of 'power', what the policy overlooks is that 'self-segregation' is itself a 'normalising interpretation' of what's happening in the world. In other words, it makes the normal belief seem that non-white communities are excluding themselves, and overlooks how barriers such as racial prejudice and housing exclusion contribute towards these circumstances. Sociological analyses of social-capital networks (networks of social ties – such as friendships, work acquaintances and so on) in the UK and US, for example, have demonstrated how white people tend to be the *most* segregated, but there's no government policy or discussion directed towards this self-segregation.

Task

Read the following and then answer the questions below. The second article is an example of someone adopting a cultural racism in light of terrorist attacks.

https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/aug/18/deeply-entrenched-racial-inequality-uk-equality-human-rights-commission?CMP=share_btn_link

http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/terrorism-in-the-uk/12009577/Paris-is-tragic-proof-that-Enoch-Powell-was-right-about-threats-to-our-country.html

1. How does the current status of racial minorities in the UK challenge post-racialism?
2. How is 'culture' relevant in understanding racism?