Troubling 'race' as a category of explanation in social science research and analysis

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Abstract

In this article, we problematise the use of the concept of race as a category of social analysis and commentary as it is used by academics, government, other social analysts and commentators. We argue that the concept has, regrettably, been used in a cavalier way in political, social and educational studies to 'explain' matters in ways that are reminiscent of apartheid 'science.' While the concept of race is critically important for understanding the impact and effects of the strategies, policies and practices of racist states on individuals, communities and societies, globally, and for thinking about the sociopolitical effects of racism, discussions about race are often trapped in ideas that have the effect of extending the very consequences that struggles against racism have sought to eradicate. Such approaches to the concept of race are insouciant about the potential for deepening the racist vocabularies, the metaphors, descriptions and stereotypes prevalent in the racist categories employed by the apartheid state and its ideologues. While racism remains highly prevalent and visible, it is critically important that the complexities of the use of race be recognised so that its usages do not have the effect of promoting racist political and economic systems and the discourses and practices associated with them. Explanations that use race as an analytical category must ensure that they do not provide justification for the ideologies and power of racist systems.

Key Words: race, racism, social research, educational analysis, analytical category

The concept of race has been used in a great deal of historical and contemporary writing. Especially in South Africa – but not only there – race as a social construct has had great importance both for understanding and explaining the racist social philosophy of the colonial and apartheid state, the impact of its policies and practices on the lives of the people of South Africa and, currently, for the complex task of redressing historical injustices perpetrated by South Africa's colonial and apartheid regimes. Indeed, it has salience in discussions about identity – especially about the elision of those identities on the receiving end of racist laws, practices and power.

But there are also profound confusions about how the concept of race is used when it refers to the racist categories employed by the apartheid state. It is important to unravel these confusions, especially in the continuing struggles against racist prejudice and stereotyping. This unravelling is pertinent not only to researchers, social scientists and scholars, but also to policy decision-makers in government, educational and other institutions. Politically, it has even wider relevance and social meaning than is contemplated in academic analysis and usage because the vocabularies of politicians, bureaucrats, business leaders and the public media are replete with race. The common discourse of parliamentarians, for example, shows little awareness of the important debates around the use of apartheid's racialised descriptions when referring to South Africans they identify as 'coloured,' 'Indian,' 'white' and 'African' (the latter being further variously named by an ostensible 'ethnic' or 'tribal' affiliation). Daily we hear of 'racial minorities' and 'nations' and other such nomenclature used to describe the citizens of South Africa. This suggests a lack of consciousness about the very contentious and historically offensive nature of these usages, and a complete disregard for the struggles to discredit the usage of such descriptions in the quest for nationhood and unity. Nothing, it seems, has changed from the staid and discredited conceptions of the racialised identities when they continue to be assertively restated in the following way:

> It is a self-evident and undeniable reality that there are Indians, Coloureds, Africans and Whites (national groups) in our country. It is a reality precisely because each of these national groups has its own heritage, culture, language, customs and traditions. (Yacoob 1985: 47)

It is clear that racial nomenclature continues to haunt the public consciousness, even after 1994, as ghosts of an unrequited past. Such usages are both reckless and unthinking and, as Alexander (1979) showed in his seminal writing on the national question, this has had the effect of reinforcing separatism and supporting conservative organisations intent on derailing the process of social change. As we have argued elsewhere:

> Despite the pre-apartheid expectation that the concept of 'race' would 'wither away' with the advent of a democratic polity and precisely because the Congress Movement has become the heir to the post-apartheid state, 'race' consciousness has remained very alive. The period of mobilization under the UDF and the National Forum towards a non-racial position notwithstanding, the position that is now the 'dominant paradigm' has reverted to the older multi-racial tradition of liberalism expressing the tenacity of the historical grip on the consciousness of the masses of the people. (Motala & Vally 2017: 142)

It is not surprising that, for some thinkers, the question of race was *the* social issue for the 21st

century.

A critique of the deliberate uses of the apartheid's racial categorisations in academic and other writings about social, educational, political, economic and other phenomena is therefore essential. This approach is not unmindful of the power and reach of the facticity of prejudice. As Alexander (1986: 84) warned: 'To deny the reality of prejudice and perceived differences, whatever their origin, is to disarm oneself strategically and tactically.' Yet it is no reason for misreading such prejudice as either excusable or disarming for the critique of racist systems. Such a critique in the context of the transition from the apartheid state unlocks the possibility of developing a framework of rights associated with being human – rights that attach to all human beings regardless of history, social location, cultural and linguistic attachments and other such attributes. If this is not done, the impact of the racist regimes of the past will remain in the material reality of the lives of those who continue to be plagued by its past and present effects.

Below, we deal with the prevalence of the uses of race as relevant to social explanation, distinct from its racist usages. Thereafter, we examine the myth of race as a biological fact, and its effects in perpetuating apartheid and other social systems. As we will show, the idea of race as a category in the natural and biological sense has been thoroughly discredited – despite attempts every now and again to resuscitate its biological foundations. Following this, we provide a concrete example of the problematic of apartheid nomenclature in social analysis, after which we set out a number of ideas to unravel the continued confusion that abounds in this regard, before making some concluding statements.

Race as potentially useful for social explanation

As a strongly prevalent social construct, the concept of race arises historically from the phenomenon of racism. It also has salience in recognising not only its perverse effects but also the struggles against it through assertions of 'blackness' (or 'black identities') as a trenchant reminder of the processes of colonialism, exploitation, slavery, oppression and the criminality pervasive in racist regimes. In that sense, it has considerable explanatory value for understanding the historical effects of racism, and how social relations are implicated in racialised identities, racist practices and the effects of these on entire communities within and across nation states. To that extent, blackness is more than simply 'the trope of the look,' or simply an ontological question, false consciousness or the 'error of philosophers' and implies, most importantly, an explanation of the material reality consonant with the political economy of Southern Africa and colonisation, more generally. The recognition of the political and social effects of racism is, simultaneously, the demand for an acknowledgement of its impact on the lives of oppressed people through centuries of human existence. Asserting this right is a deliberate act of negating the violence of enslavement, colonial and post-colonial rule and the brutality associated with the reconstitution of the lives of millions of human beings through this. The distinguishing characteristic of these assertions is a justifiable claim to a counter-hegemonic discourse against the globally dominant discourses and labels of racism. Indeed, here blackness is a signifier not merely of colour but of its meaning for

resistance against the defining attributes of racist discourses, policies and practices. In that sense, it is quite distinct from, and opposed to, the racist categories of the apartheid system, which did not admit to the concept of blackness or black political, social and cultural forms of resistance to racism. Blackness is a signifier of Biko's idea of the reclamation of dignity in black lives – in effect, a struggle against the selfsame racist nomenclatures and identity markers used by the apartheid state. Such an approach would – as did the Black Consciousness Movement in South Africa – firmly renounce the usage of the categories of Indian, coloured and Bantu.

Explanations about the use of race in the construction of racist regimes would account for the body of writing about the political economy of colonialism and apartheid developed to explain the extraordinary power of the racial categories of apartheid as both a consequence of, and a justification for, the particular form of capitalist development in Southern Africa (see, for example, Wolpe 1972; Legassick 1976; Greenberg 1980). As these analyses have shown, the impact of racist ideas on the construction of race as a sociological category is not a negation of the importance of social class, gender or other categories of social analysis. Indeed, the most useful study of society can be derived from a combination of these social categories (together with others like geographic location) thus avoiding reductive and mono-causal explanations. In this regard, Crenshaw et al. (1995) and Matsuda (1999) argue that the law is 'thoroughly involved in constructing the rules of the game' and was itself a 'constitutive element of race' – it constructed race as a category (Crenshaw et al. 1995: xxv). It shaped and was shaped by 'race relations,' not because it merely narrowed the scope of anti-discrimination laws (in liberal discourse) but through the very forms of law reproducing social power within liberal legal discourse. Its criticism of 'vulgar Marxism' was that whereas classical liberalism's approach to race was that race itself was irrelevant to race policy, the Marxists held the view that race as a category simply did not exist.

As a construct derived, in the first instance, from racist practice, race remains critical for understanding the history and evolution of apartheid capitalism or racial capitalism and is even more useful when understood in conjunction with other categories – all of which provide explanations about its evolution as a form of control over the movement and freedom of the black working-class and rural communities in South Africa. In this way, the category of race is used by critical social scientists to demonstrate the character of a racist capitalist state and their association with imperial interests, predicated on racist social norms and practices fostered for demonstrating particular forms of socioeconomic and political domination and exclusion. These explanatory uses *provide absolutely no justification for contemporary usages of the racialised and biologically determinist categories of apartheid* or an acceptance of the uses of the concept of race reliant on its phenotypical attributes. On the contrary, they are a strident rejection of these.

Why the uses of race must be problematised – sorting out the confusion

There is a need, however, to separate the political sociology of race as a category of explanation from its uses in the biologically racist categories defined by apartheid. This is because of the dangers inherent in racial (and racist) descriptions and because the concept is so 'pregnant with

confusion' and given to opportunist usages in the political, economic and ideological domains. The use of racist social classification was intrinsic to racism and its effects and the categories of race (especially Africans, coloureds, Indians and the derogatory terms that were associated with these descriptions) played a key role in entrenching racism and its impact. That is why we must examine these categories, consciously, critically and historically.

Regrettably, some academics remain untroubled by their usage of the racialised categories of the apartheid system for social 'explanation,' and continue to emulate approaches reminiscent of apartheid 'science.' This is compounded by the ubiquity of the vocabulary of racism in a variety of government documents (disregarding even the covenants of the Constitution), in the media and other places. Even more alarming is the uncritical use of these racist categories by universities and bodies such as the National Research Foundation, whose lack of understanding about the need to intervene in shaping the vocabulary and consciousness around issues of race and racism is startling. And there are instances where refusal to comply with these requirements is met with threats such as non-payment of entitlements like wages.

There is no reason why universities (and government, for that matter) cannot at least adopt an orientation that problematises the use of such categories if they regard such usage as justifiable for on the basis of the requirements of affirmative legislation, funding, scholarship opportunities and the like. This troubling continuity in the use of apartheid racial categories takes no account of the larger social, historical, philosophical and practical implications of such usage. Can there be any justification for using the racialised categories derived from the ideologues of the apartheid state, unconstrained by any considerations of its implications? How is such usage reconcilable with the key pillars on which the resistance to apartheid was founded? And what is its meaning for our understanding of the proclaimed values of nation building, social cohesion, deracialisation and the like, referred to in a wide range of policy and other documents intended to signify the beacons of a democratic and non-racial society. The absence of any serious attempt to deal with these issues has left the field wide open to contemporary usage that sometimes borders – in a wide range of public communications and academic exchanges – on nothing short of the unconscionable practices of the past. Despite the injunctions about transformation, confusions abound where race is not problematised and, worse still, irreconcilable attempts at providing justification for the usage of the racist nomenclature prevail. What are some of these?

First, the argument that avoiding the use of these racist apartheid categories or objecting to them is a failure to understand the impact of racism on the lives of black people. On the contrary, their continued use today constitutes and deepens racist stereotypes and practice, give them substance – even if not legally. Worse, it entrenches them in the public vocabulary as though these categories were not merely social constructs and *as though the proclaimed races exist.* This argument is seriously misplaced –even the need to collect data for the purposes of addressing the effects of racism does not have to follow apartheid categories in an unproblematised way.

We argue, therefore, that avoidance of the use of racist categories is not avoidance of describing racism and its impact for what it is – inhumane, dominant and barbaric. The continued use of these

racist descriptions is to give life and meaning to racism. We absolutely must find alternative ways to describe oppression and exploitation and its effects without resorting to apartheid's science and deepening its social meaning making. We cannot avoid the association of racist categorisation with racism – that's what it has always been intended for, given that the descriptions derived from racist ideologues are constitutive of, and give life and lease to, racism and its practices, prejudices, stereotypes and effects.

Second, the failure to problematise racial categories is sometimes justified for the ostensible reason that it has public currency. We are told that their 'acceptance' by the 'ordinary' public gives them legitimacy and that since, in the 'public' perception race constitutes a 'reality,' it is hardly possible to wish it away. This, it is alleged, provides justification for the continued and unmitigated use of racial categories. The reality of the existence of race as a 'social fact' means that we have little option but to accept its current usage and must recognise its value for the purposes of social classification. The further argument is that racialised classifications are no more than a reflection of what is 'self-evident' because they speak to the observable physical (and any other) differences that exist in the human population – a reality that has registered a firm imprint on the consciousness and understanding of human beings both in South Africa and worldwide; a 'fact' evidenced in the discourses, descriptions and social interactions of people everywhere or, as is now fashionable, to point to the congregation of students along 'race lines' in educational institutions and elsewhere. It is as though, the reality (unaffected by any consideration of what lies behind it) that millions of people accept these racial descriptions for themselves and for others suddenly gives these descriptions legitimacy.

This argument (because people see themselves in racial terms, racialised descriptions are unavoidable) is a mistake since, in reality, it lends credence to the ideas of racists. The persistence of apartheid's deliberate racist categories can be ascribed, in part, to their continued usage for the ostensible purpose of reshaping the postapartheid racial landscape in particular ways. This has had the effect – unintended or otherwise – of enhancing the possibilities for a postapartheid social formation that ultimately supports particular forms of privilege and social mobility and new forms of exclusion. The question that must be asked is whether these approaches to 'transformation' represent the aspirations of the oppressed and exploited, as a whole, or entrench new forms of social bifurcation – gendered, geographic and class-based – and continue to reproduce the regimes of the past for a privileged minority. A different approach to social justice and equity must surely speak to the lives of the oppressed and exploited classes *as a whole,* and find ways to address this issue without creating new forms of social difference – especially through relying on pernicious apartheid racial descriptions.

Related to the above is the consciously political, but specious, argument about the necessity of using racial categories because of their value in the very process of designing policies and strategies for the deracialisation of society and for purposes variously described as redressing historical imbalance, ensuring that the playing fields between the races are evened out and for providing affirmative and positive discrimination possibilities to those who were and continue to

be the victims of apartheid's legacy. In this approach, tracking the progress of affirmative action policies and their impact necessitates the continued use of racial categories, especially in the data (and in the analysis) that is produced to evaluate the progress of any such policies and strategies.

But this approach, in reality, serves mainly to confirm – through its use of such racial classifications – the impact and pervasive effects of racist practices as a critical historical factor. It speaks to the causal relationship between racist policies and their discriminatory and adverse effects on the population defined racially. Affirming the effects of racial policies ex post facto by using racial classification can hardly bestow the use of such categories with meaning for analytical purposes in the social sciences. The fact of race as a descriptor of its effects must take proper account of more fundamental questions about its efficacy for social analysis in the first place, its effects on social consciousness, the continuance of its legacy either by default or the failure to deliberate over its implications for the underlying social philosophy enunciated in the struggles against racism. Moreover, as debates around racial admission policies at universities show, there are many other ways of recognising the impact of race for affirming the opportunities for access to higher education (such as gender, geographic location, social status, socioeconomic background, previous opportunity, types of school access) that have much greater moral, political and historical value than the reprehensible racist categories of the past.

Importantly, therefore, the distinction we make is between racism (whose consequences were structural – political, social, economic and cultural – and personal) and its rationalisation (by the unmitigated use of racial categories whose purposes were and are intensely ideological – supporting belief systems whose effects have actively wreaked havoc on human society). In a recent interview, Barbara Fields, co-author of *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life,* says:

> We see race not as a physical fact, but as a product of racism. And we see racism not as an attitude or a state of mind, like bigotry: it's an action. It's acting on a double standard, with that double standard itself based on ancestry or supposed ancestry. (Farbman 2015: para. 9)

The interview refers to the need to overcome the ideological legacy of racism not only as bigotry but also for its social effects where social inequality is regarded as the product of 'personal responsibility,' supplanting any attention to persistent and structural racism and focusing on 'race and "race relations"' (ibid.: para. 3); 'this could not have been possible without the enshrinement of race as a natural category, the spread of the fiction that certain traits define members of one "race" and differentiate them from members of other races' (ibid.: para. 4). It should be clear from these arguments that the use of racial categories following apartheid's policies impedes a proper understanding of racism and reproduces the use of racially based explanations that are, themselves, constitutive of racism – negating the possibilities for overcoming it.

Understanding the impact of racism and the validity of some of the critical usages of the concept of race for explanation requires us to make distinctions between racism as social explanation and race as simply an uncritical acceptance of apartheid racial categories. The failure to do so is to continue

to ascribe fixed and essentialised identities, perverse stereotypes and hidden prejudices and to deepen the impact of oppressive and exploitative ideas and practices and the relations of power, social status, and privilege and advantage that flow from them throughout the world. We must be able to distinguish the socially constructed usages of race for its impact from the mythology of race used to justify the bogus science entrenching racist stereotypes and naked prejudice. For this a new vocabulary is necessary because there is no logical reason for inferring the reality of race from the fact of racial prejudice (Alexander 1979).

The myth of race

We know occasional practice is to refer to the employment of apartheid's racial categories using inverted commas or by providing an explanatory caveat about how and why they are used. Both approaches problematise the categories and proclaim the user's reservations. These caveats invariably refer to the necessity of using such categories by reference to extant apartheid-era data reproduced for the purposes of historical analysis, seeking in the main to demonstrate how apartheid policies deliberately set out to provide race-based education and other services, or to demonstrate the efficacy of its odious policies and practices for promoting racially defined social division, namely, to entrench more systematically the policies of the apartheid regime. But this is not always the case because in many instances, and especially in the case of psephological surveys, other opinion and behavioural investigations more generally, apartheid racial categories are often used unhesitatingly and without reservation.

Critical uses of the concept of race should, therefore, evince an awareness of its limitations since extant writings from as early as the 1940s, in particular, provide a useful approach to the meaning and usage of racial categories, even though they did not have the obvious benefits of subsequent developments in genome studies that have taken matters considerably further in so far as how the ostensible 'biological differences amongst the races of man' were understood. This earlier writing refers principally to the 'myth of race.' Ashley Montagu's (1942: 3) publication, *Man's Most Dangerous Myth: The Fallacy of Race*, provides a systematic refutation of the myth of race as a determinant of human behaviour, demonstrating how it was used by Hitler 'in a masterfully murderous ploy of mass psychology, mobiliz(ing) the German state to cleanse itself of "the enemy within."'

Unsurprisingly, after World War II, in the 1950s, UNESCO devoted a series of publications to this issue, hoping to penetrate the thicket of mendacious pseudo-science produced by the ideologues of fascism through their notions of race and racial superiority. Juan Comas (1951) deals with the question of racial myths in his monograph of that title for the series, and explains the misuse of Darwinian evolutionary theory for 'hateful and inhuman' purposes – converting these into the ideas labelled 'Social Darwinism.' In Comas's words, 'it is a thing which bears no relationship to Darwin's purely biological principles' (ibid.: 9). He explains how the progress of biology was

> misused to provide superficially scientific and simple solutions to allay scruples on points of human conduct. . . . It is obvious that the psycho-somatic inheritance does influence the external

appearance and the conduct of human beings, but that does not warrant the argument of the racists that (a) biological heredity is the sole important factor or (b) that group heredity is as much a fact as individual heredity. (ibid.: 9)

UNESCO's own formulation of these ideas is contained in its Statement on the Nature of Race and Race Differences by Physical Anthropologists and Geneticists, which proclaims in no uncertain terms:

> Scientists are generally agreed that all men living today belong to single species, *Homo sapiens*, and are derived from a common stock, even though there is some dispute as to when and how different human groups diverged from this common stock. (UNESCO 1951: 1)

Dunn's (1951) contribution to the UNESCO series explains how a greater understanding of the mechanism of biological heredity allows us to make clear and unequivocal pronouncements against the social conceptions of race and the strong inheritances of cultural practice 'transmitted outside the body, (through) language, custom, education and so on' (ibid.: 6). Dunn argues the judgment of science is 'clear and unequivocal':

> The modern view of race, founded upon known facts and theories of heredity, leaves the old views of fixed and absolute biological differences among the races of man, and the hierarchy of superior and inferior races founded on this old view, without scientific justification. . . . This change in biological outlook has tended to restore that view of the unity of man which we find in ancient religions and mythologies, and which was lost in the period of geographical, cultural and political isolation from which we are now emerging. (ibid.: 5)

More recently, a wide literature has developed – critiquing biologism, the reductive use of science for arguing a determinist role for genetics and biology. Sussman (2014) speaks about the perplexing reality that, despite the acceptance by the great majority of researchers on human variation that 'biological races do not exist among humans' (ibid.: 8) based on a great deal of evidence supporting this, belief in the existence of races persists. He contends that 'the belief in the reality of biologically based human races' and its racist connotations are prevalent in both the United States and Western Europe (ibid.: 2):

> It seems that the belief in human races, carrying along with it the prejudice and hatred of 'racism,' is so embedded in our culture and has been an integral part of our worldview for so long that many of us assume that it just must be true. (ibid: 3)

Referring to a critique of the ideology inherent in some approaches to the neurobiological sciences, Rose and Rose (1976) argue that many of the theories associated with it are fundamentally biologistic. By this, they assert:

> Biologism takes one part of the explanation of the human condition, excludes all other considerations, and announces that it has *the* explanation. . . . Attempting to change the human condition is then presented as an absurd opposition to both our natural selves and the natural world. The everyday possibility and actuality that men and women have continuously changed their situations in the course of history is methodologically and philosophically excluded. Biologism, for all its apparent scientificity, is thus mere ideology, the legitimation of the *status quo*. It is a method

not of explaining people, but explaining them away as 'nothing but' assemblages of larger molecules, larger rats, naked apes or hairy computers. In biologism, reductionism, which was originally simply a powerful tool for examining specific problems under rigorously defined conditions, becomes saturated with ideology (ibid.: xx).

Somewhat similarly, Polkinghorne (1996: 2) talks about the need to adopt a richer, more textured and rational account of the world not entrapped within the 'procrustean oversimplification of fundamentalist reductionism.' Importantly, he writes about geneticist Richard Dawkins' views on the related nature of the experiences of human affection and scientific wonder. Referring to interpretations of Dawkins' writing about the selfish gene, he avers that Dawkins also 'called on us to transcend the narrow motivations of the selfish gene and to repudiate those notions of eugenics or racism that might have seemed to follow from a policy of genetic survival at all costs' (ibid.: 1).

Robin Holliday (1981: 4) echoes these ideas in criticising the 'vogue for using well established principles of animal behavior as applicable to human behavior' in the controversial field of sociobiology that 'attempts to provide a more biological basis' for explaining human and social behavior. Even Appiah (1985: 21), who is sceptical about the conclusive nature of the evidence about human races, concedes, critically for our purposes, that there is 'widespread scientific consensus on the underlying genetics' and that

> every reputable biologist will agree that human genetic variability between the populations of Africa or Europe or Asia is not much greater than that within those populations; though how much greater depends, in part, on the measure of genetic variability the biologist chooses.

Talking about the biological use of race, Morris W. Foster and Richard R. Sharp (2002) refer to the tension in genetics research between those who regard racial and ethnic categories as meaningful for biology and those who argue that 'these social classifications have little or no biological significance' (ibid.: 844) They criticise the way in which geneticists approach the relationship between racial and ethnic identities and genetic variation saying:

> Inclusion of racial and ethnic identifiers in genomic resources can create risks for all members of those identified populations and influence lay perceptions of the nature of racial and ethnic groups. Thus, the burden of showing the scientific utility of racial and ethnic identities in the construction and analysis of genomic resources falls on researchers. This requires that genetic researchers pay as much attention *to the social constitution of human populations as presently is paid to their genetic composition* [emphasis added]. (ibid.: 844)

In other words, their usage in the political and popular discourses can hardly be interpreted as having the explanatory value attributed to them by some socio-biologists.

These and other writings (see, for example, Evans 2015) are used here mainly to illustrate the evolving wisdom that was accepted as received knowledge amongst scientists and other attentive associations and communities even as early as the 1950s. We need hardly be reminded about the considerable developments in progressive (anti-racist) thinking – some of which might even be critical of the weaknesses of earlier formulations not informed by genomics, and concerned primarily with refuting fascist ideas.

Regrettably, these considered explanations and arguments about the (in)validity of racial social categorisation and its impact on societies here and elsewhere have not been taken seriously. Although the condemnation of racism and its practices is the subject of legislative sanction and trenchant disapproval, the relationship between these denunciations and the continued use of racialised categories seems to have eluded understanding and analysis – even in the writings of some social scientists in their failure to consider the implications of such use for analytical and explanatory purposes. Worse, the unproblematised use of racial categories is widespread and often found in planning, policy, and strategic documents, public and private data sources, in the language of government and politicians, state, and non-state institutions, the courts and the media. No wonder it has continued to have a pervasive grip in the public discourse that, unthinkingly, evinces the continuities of the racist discourses of apartheid, threatening to undermine the hopes and aspirations of those who seek a society free of the blight of racist ideas, and a vindication of the sacrifices made by those who struggled against it.

What are the implications of the use of explanatory categories in social science research and analysis?

What, then, of the need for classification as necessary to social science and other explanation? Classification and categorisation is, of course, an essential activity for human beings and central to much of science. Human civilization is characterised by the penchant for systematisation – for seeking order from the chaos of impressions and experience. This is reflected in the systematisation of the sciences, their classification into the pantheon of scientific disciplines recognised as such. In regard to the social sciences in particular, the World Social Science Report says:

> The social sciences are concerned with providing the main classificatory, descriptive and analytical tools and narratives that allow us to see, name and explain the developments that confront human societies. They allow us to decode underlying conceptions, assumptions and mental maps in the debates surrounding these developments. They may assist decision-making processes by attempting to surmount them. (2010: 9).

In effect, scientific explanation is distinguishable from mythology, dogmatism and metaphysical speculation. Reliable explanation is discernible relative to simple description, providing new understanding of that which is to be explained (the explanandum). It is generally complex and could be 'a regularity or law or may be a theory about such phenomena or regularities' (Cornwell 2004: 174). Such explanations stress the attributes of empirical adequacy, logical consistency and applicability in a wide range of situations, even though it is recognised that, especially in the social sciences, attention must be paid to the context of applications that are not capable of the control and regulation that natural scientists aspire to – Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle notwithstanding.

Accordingly, the ability to categorise social and natural phenomena by reference to their shared properties has long been established practice. It would be hard to imagine the level and state of

bewilderment in human life without such classification. Over the millennia, natural philosophers and, more recently, scientists have established the necessary taxonomies to provide the grounds for their explanations of both the physical properties of matter, and of social life in all its dynamic complexity. The ability to classify things is, in fact, a critical attribute of language since language facilitates making distinctions between things and groups of things – employing nouns for the purpose. There are, of course, several caveats about the applicability and use of classificatory systems since they could have the effect of obscuring individual identities, and obfuscate the power of classificatory knowledge, as was the case with the apartheid state.

There are, of course, debates about approaches to the problem of explanation. Some explanations are regarded as useful for revealing the essence of particular phenomena, are founded on the premise of causal structures, interactions and processes (referring to preceding events or based on the properties of constitutive entities). And there are approaches that rely on

> the deductive-nomological model of explanation, their source of explanatory power lies in the deductibility of the explanandum, under certain conditions, from some law-like regularities under which the explanandum is subsumed. Thus the more general the regularities are, the richer the resources of explanatory power they possess. (Cornwell 2004: 175)

In the physical sciences, mathematics has been preeminent as a tool of explanation and clarification. The penchant for mathematical logic has straddled scientific ideas across the millennia and not only Pythagoras (whose origins were Greek but who was inspired by, and lived in, Africa) but also Chinese, Indian and Arabic natural philosophers have been in its thrall (Huff 1993). There are explanations that are intent on providing causalities, more precisely, causal histories relying on a base of information that ranges from the very specific to the very abstract (Lewis 1986), even though it is possible to agree that such explanations are themselves incomplete.

Approaches to explanation are not uncontested. For instance, one criticism (relating specifically to the deductive-nomological approach to explanation) is that it 'gives no account of what the connection is that makes it possible to deduce the explanandum from the explanans' (Cornwell 2004: 175). The implication of this criticism is that there must a discernible relationship between the explanation (explanans) and that which it seeks to explain (the explanandum).

Amongst the many radical social scientists, David Harvey is concerned with the problem of explanation. Particularly important is his examination of the differences between explanation in the natural sciences and in the social sciences, and the debates about this provoked by J.S. Mills' 19th century view that there was no essential logical difference in these explanations. Harvey (1989: 44) concludes that these debates confuse a number of issues, exacerbated 'by failing to distinguish between the various views and activities that may be attached to the term "scientific" explanation' In his view, there can be no justification for arguing that explanations in these branches of science are necessarily or inherently different, that is, that they are different for all purposes and conditions, since the value of

> the scientific model must ultimately be judged by its use and effectiveness. If . . . the scientific

model (i.e. the model applied in the natural sciences) provides us with the only equipment for a rational understanding of empirical phenomena, then it would be foolish to deny the application of the model on essentially pragmatic grounds [while conceding that] it is, of course, extraordinarily difficult to assess the effectiveness of the model in the social-science context. (ibid.: 59)

These observations are useful for present purposes in illuminating the relationship between the tools of scientific explanation, such as the use of classificatory categories and what they seek to explain – their explanandum. They have little meaning otherwise. By way of illustrating this point, we take Slide 37 from a presentation by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) made at the research indaba of the national Department of Basic Education (Kanjee, Frempong & Makgamatha: 2010). It illustrates the problematic of the usage of race in the data provided in answer to the question: Are the best schools good enough for ALL learners? (Table 1). The slide provides, on one axis, learner achievement (in percentages) relative to particular school quintile and, on the other axis, provides three categories in respect of these achievements (or lack thereof). These three categories refer to gender, race and home poverty quintile. What is the explanatory value of each of these categories of evidence? What analysis could be made using these categories or, to put it another way, what exactly is the relevance of these categories for the purpose of explanation and analysis?

Table 1: Are The Best Schools Good Enough For ALL Learners?

Background Characteristics		Percentage of learners not achieving (below 30%)		Percentage of learners in Quintile 5 schools	Percentage of learners in Quintile 5 schools not achieving (below 30%)	
		Mathematics	**LOLT**		**Mathematics**	**LOLT**
Gender	**Male**	76	53	11	43	20
	Female	74	39	14	40	11
Race	**African**	80	50	6	60	27
	Coloured	61	22	30	58	15
	Asian and Indians	43	20	69	25	5
	White	17	8	84	10	1

Home Poverty Quintile	1 = poorest	88	67	3	80	61
	2	82	55	7	66	34
	3	79	46	7	63	27
	4	78	44	10	59	18
	5 = least poor	57	29	28	26	5

Source: Kanjee, Frempong & Makgamatha (2010: Slide 37)

In relation to the questions of gender and poverty, the use of these categories has clear explanatory value. Moreover, they are recognisable and valid categories of analysis and are accepted as such amongst social analysts without question – indeed, they are accepted as categories of analysis across the political spectrum even though how they are used is contested (du Toit 2005). In other words, social scientists of whatever orientation recognise the validity of these categories of analysis and use them as such.

That is not the case with the category, race, since its validity is contested and its use in science is invariably accompanied with explanations that seek to justify it. It is, self-evidently, not unproblematised in the many instances of its usage. This is so because the unproblematised usage of the racial categories can lead to the conclusion that the ascription of a particular racial appellation to social groups *itself* provides the explanation to the phenomenon being explored – in the present example, the poor learner achievement of African and coloured learners, so called; the further implication is that those racial categories are inherently liable to such poor performance. On deeper examination, it is obvious that this interpretation could hardly be ascribed to the researchers in question because of the racism inherent in such an approach, unmitigated by all the necessary caveats that might ordinarily accompany such explanations. Yet the explanation (which, regrettably, is not fully explored in the case of this presentation) is, obviously, that members of society who are worst affected by poverty are the most susceptible to poor achievement – regardless of the racialised ascriptions given to them. If the use of the category, Indian and Asian, illustrates anything, it is this very phenomenon: those who have climbed out of the trap of poverty (even in relative terms) are no longer as susceptible to the effects of poverty. Although, as we know full well, even here further disaggregating of that category is likely to reveal serious differences between levels of achievement of those who continue to suffer the burden of poverty relative to those who do not. This in itself is argument enough to seriously question the usefulness of racial categories of analysis, used as they are.

The poverty of this analysis has captured, if nothing else, the continued effects of apartheid racism

as pervasive on those sections of the population who bore the brunt of the its policies, even though a small section of these (captured by reference to levels of social status, class, geographic location or income – though not gender) now evince characteristics that suggest they are beginning to climb out of these effects – once more, the critical variable being their new found class, social or other status. The implication of this analysis and explanation, based on the material realities facing learners rather than their racially ascribed identities, is that racialised categories are not merely conveniences based on their acceptance and usage in practice. They are obfuscatory, confusing and misguided. They continue to purvey the offensive terminology of apartheid's ideologues.

Even where the category of poverty is used, it could be enriched considerably since it interfaces and is deepened by a wide range of intervening and complicating factors of which perhaps the most profound is the meaning that is ascribed to poverty itself – and its relation to gender, social class, status, geographic localities, language, history and culture and other specificities affecting particular communities. Regrettably a similarly unhelpful approach is to be found in an article in the *HSRC Review* (Roberts, Weir-Smith & Reddy 2010), relating to a survey of social attitudes to the question of affirmative action, the argument being made:

> Evaluations of affirmative action were more positive among intended beneficiaries than those belonging to non-beneficiary groups. Therefore, black respondents were more supportive of race-based affirmative action than other population groups, particularly white respondents (Table 1). Over the interval, support among black respondents ranged between four and six times that of white respondents. (ibid.: 6-7)

Once again the circuitous nature of the 'explanation' is astonishing not only because of the authors' recognition of the causal effect of being 'beneficiaries' but also because, later in the article, the following advice is proffered!

> Policy-makers also need to find ways of overcoming the division created by affirmative action, potentially by repackaging preferential redress policies in ways that are less threatening and that appeal to the aversion for inequality shared by South Africans across the social, political and economic spectrum. It has been increasingly suggested that policy should concentrate more on a class-based redress agenda rather than focusing primarily on racial redress. (ibid.: 7)

What is suggested, therefore, is that researchers cannot uncritically reproduce the apartheid state's usage of racialised forms of consciousness, intended to serve its political and social hegemony, nor can they ignore the role of ideology in deepening division through the intolerable fostering of these forms of description. For social scientists, therefore, the task of using meaningful categories for social explanation is sometimes synonymous (even if not as daunting) with that of natural philosophy's millennial struggles to reverse the 'self-evident' truth of the geocentric worldview. Indeed, there are those who persist in this view to this day. Is it not self-evident that the sun rises in the east and sets in the west and goes round the earth in that way!

Conclusion

As we have argued, the concept of race has contradictory and problematic usages. While it has

value in pointing to the racism inherent in South African political economy, history, social psychology and sociology, and to the resistance against it, the concept needs to be consciously problematised in all its usages. More importantly, how race is understood has profound implications for the continued effects of the exploitative and oppressive practices of apartheid capitalism in South Africa and the struggles against these in the quest for a genuine democracy for all its citizenry. The concept of race has no salience *except* to explain how it was used by the ideologues of racism in the development of racial capitalism and the effects on Southern African society. Similarly, the concept of blackness is not to be misunderstood as a category of race – even though it might be misconstrued as such in some political discourses. As we have argued, it is signifier of the reclamation of identity, history, psychological integrity and a constitutive category of the struggle against racist capitalism. Its leading ideologues could hardly be accused of the racist usages of apartheid having vehemently opposed such usages.

There can be no reason to defend the uncritical use of racial categories in the social sciences or to emulate the obsequious science that characterised apartheid and fascist regimes. Approaches to the ideologies of racism that deliberately avoid the contextual history and ideological impact of racism in their alleged explanations must be obviated by a much broader range of analytical categories including social class, gender, geographic location, religion, language and culture and a wide variety of characteristics attributable to the title of citizenship – characteristics often obscured by the bluntness of racial classification. Phenotypical racial descriptions have serious consequences for how we think about the transition to a democratic state and society. These have little or no use in identifying the material and practical circumstances and conditions that affect social systems, and can have no useful explanatory or cognitive value other than to encourage futile and illusory enquiry and to deepen racist practice.

The arguments above should not be misunderstood to suggest that the racist impact of apartheid must not be dealt with by substantive policy and other measures (including wider public discussion) that take into account both the racist and other (gendered, social class, geographic, disability-based) mechanisms, which collectively constituted the ideological and practical foundations of apartheid capitalism.

The ubiquitous usage in the social sciences of the racist categories of the apartheid state is not only an indictment of the poverty of social thinking but is also a confirmation of the enduring role of racism in the consciousness of those who remain trapped within its nefarious frame. The task for social scientists – and especially for socially conscious scientists – is not only to provide scholarly analysis that has integrity but also to create, use and extend the vocabulary and reach of progressive and anti-racist critique and social praxis. The failure to do so is to capitulate to the continued hegemony and philosophical predispositions of apartheid's ideologues and their tainted ideas.

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