

Stuck in the middle or working the boundaries? The relationship between researching 'race' and gender and developing diversity policy

Dr Shona Hunter

s.d.j.hunter@leeds.ac.uk

1. Introduction

In this paper¹ I want to think through some of the issues raised by my experiences of doing academic research into 'race', ethnicity and *racism* which has clear policy links. It draws primarily on my experiences working as a researcher on the project 'Integrating Diversity: Gender, Race and Leadership in the Learning and Skills Sector' 2004-2006 co-directed by Sara Ahmed (Goldsmiths) and Elaine Swan (Lancaster University Management School). The project² explored a deceptively simple question what does 'diversity' do? This question responds to the fact that there has been a significant turn to 'diversity' as a way of defining the social and educational mission of schools, colleges and universities. How can we understand this

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² For further information contact Sara, Elaine or myself. The final report can be downloaded from my staff page <https://outlook.leeds.ac.uk/exchweb/bin/redir.asp?URL=http://www.sociology.leeds.ac.uk/about/staff/hunter.php>

shift? What is the relationship between diversity and equality? The research project was qualitative involving interviews with leaders, governors, practitioners, trainers, lecturers and tutors about how they perceived diversity within Adult and Community Learning (ACL), Further Education (FE) and Higher Education (HE). Our aim was to develop a nuanced and textured account of how diversity 'works' in specific educational organisations, as well as within educational sector more broadly. In this paper I'm particularly interested in considering the role of academic research and researchers in enabling 'policy dialogue' around issues of racism and sexism in publicly funded organisations.

I want to view my experience as a point of entry into thinking about wider epistemological issues - political, ethical and practical - which arise in policy based research around 'race' and ethnicity. I don't raise my experience as a means of directly critiquing either the commissioning organisation, or of our research itself (although readers will of course make their own judgement here!). However, I think that my experiences in doing this 'messy' work raise important questions around the racialising practices embedded in policy research. These questions challenge policy researchers to think about our role in the production of racialised knowledges and in knowledge production for policy purposes more generally. So some of the broader questions raised for me are around:

1. What we *should* be doing when we do this sort of research?
2. What we are *able* to do when we do this?

3. And what are we *actually* doing when we do this?

I want to begin by briefly situating the Integrating Diversity project in terms of its aim to explore what embedding, or mainstreaming 'race' and gender within institutions actually does. I'll move onto explore the genesis of our research commissioner the Centre for Excellence in Leadership (CEL), our positioning within this as researchers and our particular positioning as 'the diversity research team'. I then want to talk about 'discomfort'. Discomfort on two levels: the discomfort we as researchers often have when we understand our own involvement in racialising practices in policy based research; but I also want to think through some other forms of 'discomfort' that I think that we think less about as researchers, and how these relate to our role in policy making. The basic point that I want to consider is that embedding 'race' into every aspect of research can sometimes be as problematic as failing to embed this at all.

Research and sceptical detachment

Before this, I want to situate this discussion in a couple of broader comments around the nature of academic work and research more generally. The first comments come from Edward Saids' posthumously published book 'Humanism and democratic criticism':

University Humanists are in an exceptionally privileged position to in which to do their work ... the academy – with its devotion to reflection, research, Socratic teaching, and some measure of sceptical detachment – allows one freedom from the deadlines, the obligations to an importunate and exigent employer, and the

pressures to produce on a regular basis, that afflict so many experts in our policy – think – tank riddled age.
(Said, 2004:71-72)

The second set of comments comes from Marian Barnes and colleagues' recent volume which discusses their experience of conducting the national evaluation for a specific public health initiative for the DoH. Of such research they say:

The Job of the policy researcher is to illuminate the processes of change and experience that they observe...The ethical obligation of the policy researcher is to make a contribution – albeit a modest one – to the social processes of promoting understanding and promoting change. It is not to award or withhold a seal of approval to this or that 'flavour of the moment' initiative that might have provided the pretext for a new investigative opportunity.
(Barnes *et al*, 2005:1999)

At first sight these two comments might seem to be talking at least about different approaches to the same thing, if not about very different things. Said is commenting on humanism within the American university context which he suggests is very different than those contexts policy researchers might be used to sitting in; there is time for reflection, freedom from deadlines, exigent bosses and constant production - all of which enable 'sceptical detachment'. My reading of Barnes' and colleagues comments however, is that they too seem to be thinking about the role of the policy researcher as being about achieving precisely such 'sceptical detachment'. They highlight the importance of 'shining a light on complex processes in reflective scholarly ways' (2005:196). It is just the context for their research that they conceptualise differently.

So what is this 'sceptical detachment' that we're looking to achieve? Later in this same essay Said (2004: 76-83) talks about the task for humanists: as not to 'belong somewhere' but to 'be both insider and outsider' to the ideas and values which circulate in society. This should not be about 'securing a position' but an unending process, about maintaining tensions and excavating silences, alternative memories and hidden perspectives on the social. It is an anti-pedagogic mode which refuses 'to admonish and advise' (see also Duggan, 2003). When you strip away differences in rhetoric in the two texts this is similar to what Barnes and colleagues aspire to.

I want to return to this issue of sceptical detachment at the 'end' of my story.

Our research: So where did we start?

Before I go on I should say that this is very much my take on our project and there will be differences in my perspective and that of the other team members. In brief, the project is a large scale, interdisciplinary qualitative piece of research which set out to explore three things:

1. Just how integrated or embedded the notion of diversity is across the learning and skills sector in the context of the current equalities policy agenda.
2. What this embedding actually means, what are people and organisations talking about when they invoke the notion of diversity?
3. What does this embedding actually do in practice and in particular in terms of leadership practices?

Whilst the project explores the intersectionality of social divisions it maintains a specific focus on 'race' and gender. It is important to note that this focus on 'race' *and* gender, whilst functioning partly to provide some form of manageability for the research project, was in large part related to the policy landscape at the time of commissioning. Indeed the explicit insertion of gender was negotiated at the point of commissioning and at least partly justified by the housing of the project in Women's Studies. This focus is in itself important for my general argument and is something that I go on to explore in more detail in the following sections. In order to achieve some sort of adequate coverage of the learning and skills sector we split up this larger project into a number of other subprojects each of which one member of the team took forward.

My own work focused on a range of adult and community learning provision. I used the SABRE ethical code (SABRE, 2001) to underpin my research strategy and developed this in relation to elements of the feminist psychosocial relational methodology I have developed in my other work around gendering and racialising practices in the health services (Hunter, 2005a; Hunter, 2005b). This theoretical approach views racialised and gendered organisational structures as both reflected and resisted at collective, individual and relational levels (Hunter, 2003; Hunter, 2006; see also Williams, 2000).

Methodologically the approach takes accounts of the ethical and practical complexities to be encountered at each of these levels, and in particular in relation to doing participatory research into 'race' and gender from a politicised perspective. An important part of this approach is its consideration of my own positioning as a white woman doing equalities research; the negotiation of power and meaning with research participants and other team members. Its focus on listener response within research interactions and also extends out to exploring the role of reader response to texts produced from these interactions in the production of knowledge and meaning (Hunter, 2005b).

What I wanted to focus on today are some of the methodological issues that I had given less thought to before embarking on this current project. This set of issues relate to the effects of positioning our research and us as researchers as central to policy development (and it could be argued implementation) in the learning and skills sector. So whilst the consideration of the production of knowledge and meaning in research situations remains important, this positioning brings wider, macro issues of reader response and reception into sharper relief than in my other work.

Success for All, the DfES, CEL and where it really all started

The relationship of our research project to the Centre for Excellence in Leadership (CEL) is complex, and slightly different to other commissioning relationships that you might find in terms of Government funded research.

CEL is a new leadership college for the Learning and Skills Sector. It grew out

of Theme 3 of Success for All (SFA), the long-term reform strategy for that sector laid out by the DfES in 2002. This particular theme focuses on Developing the leaders, teachers, trainers and support staff of the future. One of the key aims in Theme 3 is to 'increase the diversity of senior staff'. As such CEL was created as a direct result of central government policy. And it is positioned as a key mechanism by which that theme of the strategy will be *delivered*.

There are some important points to draw out in relation to this focus. First, it is clearly in line with broader Government targets relating to achieving equality and diversity within the public sector. However, the remit in SFA specifically, was also prompted by the struggles and work done by Black and Minority Ethnic Staff in the sector and in particular the work of the Commission for Black Staff in FE (2002). Indeed, The Commission was finalising its analysis of institutional racism in the sector at the time SfA was launched. Finally, I want to highlight the way in which 'race' and 'race' equality are privileged in SfA as indicators of diversity, over and above other sets of social relations. So in paragraph 82 it states:

Increasing the diversity of leaders of managers in the sector is an important challenge. For example, most learning and skills providers have no senior black and minority ethnic staff ... the Department and the LSC have taken joint responsibility for ensuring the recommendations [of the CBS] are implemented and evaluated ... Together we will establish a steering group of key stakeholders to advise and pursue action and evaluate its impact.

It is not only SfA that was working in this way, the LSC (see for example, 2004) was also privileging 'race' and ethnicity as indicators of diversity. This is important because it sets a specific discursive context for the construction of equality and diversity policies which follow this pattern. It is also important to note that this is not only occurring in the learning and skills sector, but across health (Hunter, 2005b), Social Care (Lewis, 2000) and more generally via the community cohesion agenda (Worley, 2005).

The initial aims of SfA were largely carried through into CEL. The successful bidder was a consortium of Lancaster University Management School, the Learning and Skills Development Agency, Ashridge Business School and the OU (although the latter has subsequently played a smaller part than originally envisaged). It would be funded by the DfES for three years after which point it would be expected to be self financing.

CEL was launched in 2003 as a learning provider for the sector. Its 'Unique Selling Point' however, was to be its academic research base. With seven 'flagship' research projects from the outset. The largest of these is ours. The Centre's strategy document describes its remit to:

'promote and support leadership improvement, transformation and capacity building across the sector, to provide leadership for learners and employees. A key aim is to *improve the diversity profile* of leaders in the sector' (CEL, 2004).

In this Strategy document the 'Integrating Diversity Project' was positioned as one of the key mechanisms for delivering these organisational aims both

within the centre and sector wide in relation to diversity. Here too the emphasis was on 'race' equality as an indicator of diversity. Likewise in the Centre's Diversity Strategy (2005) the Integrating Diversity Research is given prominence in terms of its contribution to CEL and the sector, cited 5 times over 12 pages. As such from the beginning both the provision of research informed knowledge generally and diversity as an organisational ideal, were high up the Centre's remit.

This context is important not only because we are commissioned by CEL to produce knowledge about 'diversity' but because we are also part of CEL and are being positioned as a means to achieving diversity within the organisation and as one mechanism for implementing this across the learning and skills sector. It is significant that no other research project is positioned in such a publicly visible way. Our positioning then seems to assume a number of things about the relationship between the research project and the organisation, not least that our project's approach to diversity will be compatible with that of the organisation. At least as important is the related assumption that the notion of diversity itself is uncontested within CEL and between its different partner organisations³.

Discomfort mark 1

So what is happening here then? And why is it I feel so uncomfortable? There is no doubt that CEL is moving to grapple with some of the complexities of an equalities agenda. Much of this effort is focussed on exploring issues surrounding the under-representation of certain staff groups across the

³ Of course, I am sidestepping here the more thorny issue of the nature of organisations in general and this one in particular, which as a virtual organisation is housed across three different sites, London, Lancaster and Ashridge.

learning and skills sector, in particular the under-representation of Black and Minority Ethnic Staff at senior levels.

Its diversity strategy is clear that it is concerned to create 'a dialogue' around the number of different perspectives on issues of equality and diversity (CEL, 2005). This strategy grapples with competing notions of individualised deficit models of diversity, an acknowledgment of the reproduction of structural inequalities, the role of whiteness and other normative social relations within organisations and the development positive action programmes as a means of addressing some of these issues. CEL is clear that it has learning to do around these issues. Unsurprisingly, it is finding some areas more difficult than others.

One area where public sector bodies often encounter difficulties in terms of understanding racialised social relations is in terms of effectively 'engaging' with Black and Minority Ethnic staff and service providers in equalities initiatives. Within the learning and skills sector this difficulty is particularly pronounced within adult and community learning contexts (Hunter, 2005d). One of the key challenges here is the failure of largely white led organisations to understand the reticence of Black led organisations to work with them. They thus misunderstand the context of racialised power relations (Sudbury, 1998). Such misunderstandings constitute a common form of 'multicultural fantasy' (Ahmed, 2004) where the 'gift' of equalities work (or solutions) is one offered by white staff to Black staff, a practice which tends to sustain unequal power relations in favour of the former, denying Black staff's autonomy (past

and present) to progress an equalities agenda. CEL is no different in terms of the difficulties experienced in engaging Black and minoritised staff in its work, and in particular Black and minoritised staff working in community contexts.

One of the organisational solutions to this 'failure' was to begin to use the 'expertise' of the diversity team to fill this gap. Thus, very early on we as a research team were being called on to input into the development of CELs equalities agenda through our 'research findings' and in a consultative capacity. It is this early inputting and its nature which have made our research even more challenging than we had maybe anticipated. The first challenge comes in terms of the general absence of time for scholarly reflection before 'putting findings' out there to be used, the importance of which cannot be underestimated as I discuss in the following section. A second set of issues relate to where this places us in this engagement, consultation conundrum.

I think what was happening to us as a team and to our research represents the paradoxical quality of 'race' and racism within organisations. A range of research and commentary points to the variety of ways in which one of the key paradoxes of 'race' is its 'now you see it, now you don't character' (Lewis, 2000), it is always an 'absent presence' (Phoenix, 1987, Burman *et al*, 2004). No matter which way you look at it 'race' is over-determined. I especially like Evelyn Brooks Higginbothom's (1992) description of 'race' as metalanguage which constitutes 'double-voiced discourse'. Whether 'race' is 'textually omitted or textually privileged' it has a totalising effect on other social relations. It can be used to both empower and disempower depending on the

intentions of the speaker (and how that gets taken-up). More recent work has identified other versions of this paradox. My own research in the health services (Hunter, 2005b) considers the ways in which speaking about 'race' can be used a means by which people actually avoid positioning the self within racialised social relations. Findings from our current project such as Sara Ahmed's (2006) work demonstrate the ways in which writing and creating 'race' equality policies can become a means to displacing action against racism. Where the production of texts and policy becomes the policy ends rather than the means to achieve action.

The highly visible position of a 'race' equality agenda in the learning and skills sector and CEL, and the positioning of our team in relation to this tends to follow this paradoxical pattern. So for example, within the organisation we as a research team are often the first point of call when it is seeking 'diverse' perspectives that it might not usually have 'access to'. This potentially has a number of effects. It misunderstands the complex power relations inherent in our positioning as researchers and academics – we are not necessarily the best means for 'accessing' the views of 'our' participants or the learning and skills sector more generally, and certainly are not a substitute for these views. Moving to consult us first, and using our expertise in this way can also be a means of confining responsibility for diversity to certain groups of people within an organisation. It re-distributes responsibility for equalities work unequally and effectively removes organisation wide responsibility for achieving equality and diversity (Ahmed *et al*, 2005). More than this, it can be a means by which 'we' as a diverse set of bodies, Black and Minoritised and

white women, come to embody organisational diversity, reproducing the unequal relations of responsibility at the same time as our presence challenges unequal access to certain organisational spaces. As such it potentially allies the research very closely to the organisational practices which our project findings are critiquing in other parts of the learning and skills sector.

Basically we as a team become one of the very means by which the organisation demonstrates its commitment to diversity and we in turn serve to do 'diversity' for the organisation. I want to be clear here that I'm not necessarily seeing our participation in any of these things as wrong either on our part or on the part of the organisation to which we belong. As employees we are after all quite literally an organisational resource. What I am saying is that drawing on the diversity research and us in this way must not be done innocently. It must demonstrate a thorough consideration of the complexities of raced and gendered organisational power.

So in response to my question around discomfort, maybe one reason that I feel uncomfortable is that when we go back to Said, and Barnes and colleagues comments I am very clearly an insider/outsider, not only to the issues I study (Fine, 1994) but also to the commissioning organisation (Puwar, 2004). I am struggling with what this means for my work as a white woman researching 'race' and ethnicity, as an academic, as a teacher; what this means for my relationship to the organisation and to those that participate

in the research that I do. This is always an uncomfortable and 'in process' relation.

Discomfort mark two

But why is it *really, really* that I feel so uncomfortable about all this? Over and above the myriad of issues I've just raised I want to suggest that there is something else that is bothering me about our visibility. I want to suggest that it is precisely *because*:

...the study of diversity should not be seen as representing truths (or facts that speak for themselves) [and *because*] It is an attempt to recast the meaning of difference in the context of [political and social debates around this, for example in the UK post the RRAA] ... [and because] it is thereby a *social science (political) strategy* ... (Baez, 2004: 299)

- that I feel uncomfortable.

To say that all research is political may not seem a very original point to make. For example we know a variety of feminist perspectives have long perceived the social and knowledge about that as in some sense political (Bacchi, 1999). But I am saying more than this and I think Baez is too. If we take Foucault's (1970) work around social science, power and knowledge seriously, in the present situation, where I am being called into a direct relationship with 'diversity' *policy* and 'diversity' *work* through my work as an academic; what have I become? And what are the costs? How much power and what sort of power do I have? I want to suggest that it is when we really start to understand and attempt to unpick the absolutely *political* nature of the

debates we are involved in and the very political perspectives and *strategies* we are ourselves using as *policy* researchers that we start to feel uncomfortable.

So for example: If we as a team throughout our findings highlight the problematic nature of using 'positive images' of Black and Minoritised staff in organisational documents. We might say that such practices can in some circumstances constitute a form of appropriation of certain bodies to demonstrate numerical diversity where the qualitative experiences of staff remain steeped in racialised inequalities. But what is it then in *policy terms* that we are asking the organisation to do? Take out all images which are not 'representative' of those who at present make up the organisation until the organisation's culture matches up to what we suggest it should be? Or for organisations to consider the power implications when they use such images? What do our findings have to offer in terms of a 'strategic fix', a 'quick fix' or indeed any 'fix at all'? Will the organisation be 'happy' with our findings if we suggest either? More importantly will they use them? Do we not disclose certain findings because of our fears around how they may be taken-up and their implications when they get translated into policy? How far then do we get imbricated at the policy development stage?

All of this raises important questions around our role as researchers in the process of knowledge production, and the complex processes of producing knowledge for policy more generally (see Davies *et al*, 2005; Glasby and Beresford, 2006). What does doing that 'sceptical detachment' that I

mentioned before, mean then in practice? An abdication of responsibility?

Responsible research? I find this notion both useful and dangerous.

Attachment to a 'sceptical detachment' can be a means of resistance, as Said suggests, but I think it can also be used as a sort of politically abstaining resistance. It can lead to a desire to abstain from the practice, or *recognition of the practice* of the political (or policy) because of what this might mean.

I think this abstinence can be seen in other debates around evidence based policy. An important element to these debates is a focus on how government agencies use notions of evidence based policy to demonstrate that they heed social scientific research, whereas this adherence to EBP is 'in fact' a political strategy, a technique of governmentality which avoids rather than explores complexity (see for example Naughton, 2005). These arguments are extremely persuasive. What they side step however, is the ways in which social scientific research *in resisting EBP* can itself often become the deployment of a political strategy in the guise of 'complicating matters with a balanced debate' (2005:64). So I might be aspiring to sceptical detachment and one of the ways in which we attempted to achieve this as a team was to constantly fight against the oversimplification of our findings resisting their reduction to the creation of case studies, tool kits etc. I might constantly want to resist being pinned down to a position *on* something, or in particular a position where I have to speak *for* someone? But, at what point do I have to take-up a position? At what point does refusing to speak compromise both me and the work that I do? As Baez (2004:299) comments 'social science strategy is implicitly creating and legitimating a particular view of the world,

and as such it is taking a side in the struggle over the power to impose such a view on the world'. Notions of complexity and 'balanced debate' are in and of themselves a perspective on how the world should be and how it should be done. An even more difficult possibility to acknowledge is that notions of complexity *may* be used to refuse the often much harder work towards taking-up a position⁴. This set of conundrums are also interesting in that they mirror elements the dilemmas that participants in the study also had in terms of which knowledges and arguments to forward in favour of diversity at what points and in which contexts (Ahmed *et al*, 2005; Ahmed, 2006a; Hunter, 2006; Kilic, 2006)

I think that this range of issues is important in relation to current debates around the relationship between research and policy. First, because it draws our attention to the disjunction between what commissioning organisations expect of research, and in particular academic research and what it is practicable, or desirable for the research to achieve (Davies *et al*, 1995; Pawson and Tilley, 1997). In efforts to resolve this mismatch recent developments consider research as informing policy, rather than providing the evidence base for policy. Thus, acknowledging that research will only ever be one of many influences in policy development. More interesting still are current moves to 'evidence *inspired* policymaking'. The current Chief Government Social Researcher Sue Duncan comments:

⁴ This is not to suggest that these positions are once and for all. All positions must be revisable because contexts, worlds and the subjects that inhabit, make and are made by them always change (see Harraway, 1997).

We are not simply purveyors of facts; we need to go further and have a strong role in policy development and review. I want to see more social researchers use their knowledge in this way to offer interpretations of what data actually means for policy. Who, after all, is better placed? (and if we don't do it, someone else will!)
(Duncan, 2005:11).

This type of approach to policy research, and social research more generally seems to suggest a fundamental shift in the acknowledged role of the academy and academic researchers within this. Again, of course there are prospects and dangers. Not least the potential positioning of social researchers as attempting to control both the production and reception of the knowledge that they generate. At different times we have had to consider all of these different things as a team and how this implicates us in broader racialising practices through policy development. I am not suggesting that these issues are new to research practice and knowledge production, social studies of science have been exploring the hidden complexities of knowledge production for some time now. What I am suggesting is that it is the explicit public legitimisation of the power of social researchers to develop and interpret for policy purposes which is new. This seems to cast the issues in a different light. Strathern is also concerned by the implications of a single locus for the control of the production and the reception of knowledge.

Science's orientation to 'society' has moved from (a) demonstrating its effectiveness in reaching potential consumers ... to (b) requiring something like endorsement from society itself. Here consumption becomes part of the production process ... the switch away from 'public understanding' of science to 'public engagement' entails a switch from society as the passive consumer to society as an active consumer-participant in knowledge production.

(Strathern, 2004:9)

One effect of such shifts is the incorporation of society via notions of engagement into social sciences aims and objectives in order to pre-empt society's [possibly damning] verdict.

So to return to where I started, I think this notion of our political role in research into 'race' and ethnicity is important because it demands that we and the organisations who commission such research think about:

1. what organisations are expecting of us as researchers and the extent to which this is in any way realistic, or appropriate.
2. what we are asking of ourselves as researchers.
3. what we ask of participants in our research.
4. what we are asking of those that consume and use that research.
5. what sort of policy knowledge this creates, how is meaning negotiated and what are the very 'concrete' material effects of this process.

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